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ABSTRACT

This issue of the OSSC Bulletin explores problems encountered in implementing a closely associated group of educational innovations whose adoption has become increasingly common in recent years. This "family" of organizational and instructional practices includes non-age-graded organization, mixed-age grouping, developmentally appropriate practices, continuous-progress learning, integrated or thematic instruction, and cooperative learning. Data were gathered from a review of literature and 10 telephone interviews conducted with teachers and administrators. Chapter 1 surveys the theoretical base for nongraded education and for common nongraded practices and program configurations, focusing on areas in which controversy exits or research evidence is incomplete. It also shows how ignorance of the change process can affect implementation. Chapter 2 explores misunderstandings that often sabotage nongraded practices, and how these misunderstandings develop, and suggests actions that can be taken to reduce them. The third chapter examines the ways inadequate practical skills lead to failure and discusses effective ways for teachers to acquire the appropriate skills. Chapter 4 illustrates how an unsupportive school culture can discourage educators and undermine a program, and chapter 5 documents the need for district and state support. The sixth chapter considers the need for sufficient time and financial resources to prevent program failure. It examines how these factors have affected implementation efforts in British Columbia, Kentucky, and Oregon. Chapter 7 suggests actions school boards and administrators can take to avoid or overcome these obstacles. A Bulletin in Brief, a four-page condensed version, is included. (LMI)

# NONGRADED EDUCATION

## Overcoming Obstacles to Implementing the Multiage Classroom



Joan Gaustad

*Special Issue*

Oregon School Study Council
November and December 1994 • Volume 38, Numbers 3 and 4

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# Preface

In late August 1992, I received a call from Jane Doe (not her real name), a teacher at a small Oregon private school. Jane had originally been assigned to teach a combined third/fourth-grade class during the 1992-93 school year. But her teaching assignment changed when too many second-graders registered to be accommodated in the one class planned for them. In previous years, an additional teacher had been hired when such a situation arose. This year, however, an administrator came up with a wonderful alternative: give Jane the extra second-graders and have her teach a nongraded class of seven- to ten-year-olds. Jane was informed of this change in class composition *two weeks* before the start of the school year.

I was appalled at the situation in which Jane found herself. It had taken me several months of full-time, intensive work—reading, researching, interviewing teachers and administrators, visiting classrooms, calling departments of education—to gather, assimilate, and organize the information I presented in my March and April 1992 OSSC Bulletins, *Nongraded Education: Mixed-Age, Integrated, and Developmentally Appropriate Education for Primary Children,* and *Making the Transition from Graded to Nongraded Primary Education.* And I had only *described* nongraded instruction, not attempted to put it into practice! What meaningful preparation could Jane do in the one week remaining before school started?

As I struggled to pull together helpful information for Jane, it occurred to me that I had never heard of that age range being combined. The major cognitive changes that occur around age nine would make a class of seven- to ten-year-olds extremely difficult to work with, no matter how much preparation time was provided.

"I felt it wouldn't work," said Jane. "I got up and said as much at a meeting at the school. And afterward an administrator came up to me and said, 'Now, now, Jane, don't get all twitter-pated about this. Nongraded education is the coming thing'."

Jane's story had a happy ending: a few days later, her school hired an

extra second-grade teacher after all. But the incident illustrates the ignorance that exists among some well-meaning educators concerning the complexity of the transition from graded to nongraded education and the amount of time and support teachers need to make the change successfully.

I hope this Bulletin will facilitate successful change by reducing such ignorance, warning educators of common pitfalls, and suggesting sources for the information they need to make well-informed decisions as they implement nongraded classes. It would be unfortunate indeed for the potential of nongraded education to be undermined by misguided enthusiasm and hasty, inadequate planning.

# Contents

# Introduction

This Bulletin explores problems encountered in implementing a closely associated group of educational innovations whose adoption has become increasingly common in recent years. This "family" of organizational and instructional practices includes non-age-graded organization, mixed-age grouping, developmentally appropriate practices, continuous-progress learning, integrated or thematic instruction, and cooperative learning.

These innovations share a common research base and many elements of a common philosophy. Together they challenge the tenets and practice of traditional graded instruction as it has been practiced for a century and a half. Unfortunately, they have proved distressingly vulnerable to misinterpretation, distortion, and hasty or ineffective implementation.

## The Graded Model of Education

Graded education, the practice of classifying and dividing students by chronological age, was introduced to the United States by educator Horace Mann, who encountered it during an 1843 visit to Prussia. The then-revolutionary idea of mass public education had created an urgent need for a system capable of handling large numbers of pupils economically, and the novel graded method of instructional organization was praised for its factory-like efficiency. It quickly became the standard throughout the nation, except in rural areas with too few students to subdivide economically.

The graded model assumes that groups of students who are the same chronological age are relatively homogeneous intellectually, will benefit from the same types of instruction, and should progress at the same rate. Homogeneity is assumed to facilitate effective teaching; thus heterogeneity should be reduced as much as possible. If numbers permit, heterogeneity among same-age students is reduced by assigning them to classrooms according to perceived ability or achievement. Students are further subdivided

within classrooms to create more homogeneous subgroups for various subjects, such as reading.

The graded school follows an "assembly-line" model both in physical arrangement and in terms of curriculum. Each classroom contains one teacher and from two to three dozen students, typically seated in rows of desks facing the front of the room. All classes at a grade level are expected to teach the same skills and cover the same content during the academic year. Content is subdivided into discrete curriculum areas: reading, mathematics, science, social studies, and so forth. Every class at a given grade level within a school district uses the same textbooks for each content area. The school day is divided into time periods of equal length, and one content area is taught per period. Learning is often assessed by standardized multiple-choice or true-false tests that can be quickly and efficiently scored.

The teacher, who works individually and has little contact with colleagues, acts as the imparter of knowledge—largely academic—to passively receptive students, who are expected to work individually. Collaboration among students is considered cheating; student interaction during class time is frowned upon as an interruption of learning. ABCDF grades, which are used to motivate students as well as to assess achievement, are assigned competitively: student progress is evaluated by comparison with that of classmates.

At the end of each year students are either promoted to the next grade level, where they will be exposed to new content under the tutelage of a different teacher, or retained, to repeat an entire year studying the same content, taught in the same manner as it was when they failed to master it.

Actual graded schools are not necessarily as rigid as this hypothetical model. Excellent, dedicated teachers and administrators have always worked within the graded structure to provide alternatives to students whose needs diverge from the norm. Many graded schools have incorporated elements of effective, flexible new instructional practices. Nonetheless, in many ways graded organization acts as a strait jacket for effective instructional practices and creative thinking.

Studies of graded practices such as ability grouping and promotion/retention have shown them to be academically ineffective as well as damaging to children's motivation and self-esteem. Research has found nongraded programs to be at least as successful academically as graded programs, even when assessed by means of the standardized tests to which graded programs are geared, and superior socially and emotionally.

Social and economic changes are steadily making graded education even less appropriate. America's population becomes more heterogeneous with each passing year. Job opportunities for the undereducated vanish. Employers seek employees with problem-solving and teamwork skills,

technical knowledge, and, above all, the ability to adapt and learn as changing conditions make old information obsolete. Now, on the brink of the twenty-first century, the time is ripe for the nineteenth-century graded model of education to give way to a new instructional model.

## A New Instructional Model Emerges

The instructional methods in the nongraded "family" are based on a radically different set of assumptions than those that underlie graded education. These assumptions, the most important of which are summarized below, have emerged from decades of research in various fields of study.*

Children vary in intellectual, social, and emotional development just as they differ physically. They may progress in spurts, hit plateaus, and even regress at times in any of these areas, rather than progressing at a steady, predictable rate. Not only do children develop differently from same-age peers, but individuals may develop at different rates in different areas of functioning. In addition, individuals with different learning styles rely to varying degrees on auditory, visual, and kinesthetic cues. Therefore, teachers should use a variety of instructional methods and materials and present open-ended learning opportunities that are accessible to children at different levels of ability and readiness.

Young children are cognitively unable to engage in abstract thinking; they learn best through concrete, hands-on activities. They have a great need for physical activity and are fatigued by long periods of inactivity. Therefore, instruction should be active rather than passive.

Grouping children heterogeneously by age and other factors promotes cognitive and social growth and reduces antisocial behavior. Discussion and verbal exchange, particularly with other children of close but not identical age, play an important role in cognitive growth. Cooperative learning can produce greater academic achievement than either competitive or individual learning; it also has social and emotional benefits. Therefore, heterogeneous classes should be the norm, and instruction should include cooperative groupwork and provide many opportunities for children to converse and interact with classmates.

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*The research referred to is presented more fully in my March 1992 OSSC Bulletin, *Nongraded Education: Mixed-Age, Integrated, and Developmentally Appropriate Education for Primary Children.* I recommend that readers desiring more information on research-based knowledge of teaching and learning also consult *Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain* (Renate Nummela Caine and Geoffrey Caine 1994), *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8* (National Association for the Education of Young Children 1987), and *Nongradedness: Helping It to Happen* (Robert H. Anderson and Barbara Nelson Pavan 1993).

Whatever the age of the learner, skills and information are more readily mastered and retained when taught in a meaningful context. Learning is impeded by stress, fear, and anxiety, and facilitated by relaxation and enjoyment. Therefore, curriculum should be integrated rather than broken down into discrete subject areas, and enjoyment of the learning process should take priority over the learning of specific skills or facts.

Standardized testing of the multiple-choice, paper-and-pencil variety does not accurately assess students' learning. Students are also frequently unable to apply academic knowledge to practical, real-world contexts. Therefore, assessment should focus on children's ability to problem-solve and use knowledge in context rather than on mastery of specific content. Evaluation of children's progress should consider social and emotional as well as academic areas, and satisfactory progress should not be determined by comparison with classmates.

Instructional and organizational practices based on these well-supported assumptions have the potential for greater success than their graded predecessors. However, programs based on sound assumptions can still be poorly designed and implemented. Fortunately, recent research has also produced valuable insights into the process of educational change that can guide successful implementation. These basic elements of successful change are explored in the April 1992 OSSC Bulletin, *Making the Transition from Graded to Nongraded Primary Education*.

Chapter 1 of this Bulletin surveys the theoretical base for nongraded education and for common nongraded practices and program configurations, focusing on areas in which controversy exists or research evidence is incomplete. This chapter also considers how ignorance of the change process can affect implementation. Chapter 2 explores misunderstandings that often sabotage nongraded practices and how they develop, and suggests actions that can be taken to reduce them.

Chapter 3 examines the ways inadequate practical skills lead to failure. Chapter 4 shows how an unsupportive school culture can discourage educators and undermine a program, and chapter 5 documents the need for support from the district and state. Chapter 6 considers the need for sufficient time and financial resources to prevent program failure.

In reality, of course, all these factors are intertwined and inseparable. Inadequate understanding of change often results in inadequate support. Theoretical understanding and practical experience with instructional strategies interact and modify each other. Insufficient money and time are often functionally equivalent, and both contribute to educators' subjective experience of feeling unappreciated and emotionally unsupported.

Chapter 7 concludes by suggesting actions school boards and administrators can take to avoid or surmount these obstacles.

*Chapter 1*

# A Shifting and Expanding Knowledge Base

In the graded model of education, textbooks, teachers' guides, and district curriculum requirements guide teachers in planning instruction and limit variation among classrooms.

The nongraded model encourages variation and gives teachers more individual responsibility for success or failure. This greater responsibility requires that teachers possess a stronger theoretical foundation and greater instructional expertise than were expected in graded classrooms.

There is no recipe to follow in creating a nongraded classroom. Teachers must possess indepth knowledge of child development and learning, a large repertoire of instructional strategies, and the ability to design and modify curriculum. They must be able to adapt instruction to the needs of individual learners and groups of children in their particular classroom.

The fact that the knowledge base is continually expanding adds an additional layer of challenge and uncertainty to the process. Many promising techniques and strategies are still evolving. In effect, teachers become partners with researchers and program developers as they refine these techniques in practice. Teachers hold the final responsibility for judging whether practices truly benefit the children in their care.

Presenting the content teachers need to know is far beyond the scope of this Bulletin. This chapter provides a brief overview of important content areas, emphasizing points of potential confusion where terms have alternative definitions, program configurations vary, or disagreement exists among experts. It also discusses the current status of research on program effectiveness and its implications for educators.

Administrators of schools or districts considering nongraded practices need to understand the change process as well as the principles underlying nongraded practices and the differences between various program configura-

tions. In planning for implementation, knowledge about change may be of even greater value to administrators than knowledge about nongraded programs.

## Concepts, Definitions, and Program Configurations

Learning definitions of basic terms is a necessary step in exploring any new field. But the terminology associated with nongraded instructional practices can lose the unwary novice in a confusing maze. Many concepts overlap; sometimes different terms are used for identical concepts or practices. On the other hand, the same term may be applied to quite different practices or used with subtly, but significantly, different connotations. It can be quite a shock to realize, halfway through reading a book or article, that a familiar term is being used with a distinctly different meaning than the one it had in a previous book or article!

These differences are not always superficial. Differently designed programs with the same general label may have quite different records of effectiveness. It is important for educators considering nongraded practices to understand these crucial differences.

The following descriptions are complete and accurate to the best of my current, evolving understanding. Readers should not rely on them unquestioningly. The wise reader always asks, "How does *this* author, researcher, or practitioner define x?"

### Nongraded, Ungraded

The interchangeable terms *nongraded* and *ungraded* are among the most problematic. People unfamiliar with them often assume they refer to *not giving letter grades* rather than *not placing children in classes with grade-level designations.* Another drawback is that they (and the somewhat more specific *non-age-graded*) are negative terms, communicating what is *not* being done rather than what *is* being done.

The term *nongraded*, in particular, has evolved over time to encompass much more than its original meaning. In some cases, it has been applied to graded practices by well-meaning but misguided innovators; in other cases, educators have used alternative terms for practices that *were* nongraded to avoid negative associations it acquired due to the failure of poorly designed nongraded programs.

The central tenet of non- or un-graded education is that individuals are different and should not be subjected to identical, assembly-line treatment. John Goodlad and Robert Anderson introduced the terms to a broad American audience in 1959 in their influential book, *The Nongraded Elementary*

*School.* Goodlad and Anderson recommended a non-age-graded organizational structure that would permit individual students to make *continuous progress* (see below) in each learning area, taking as much or as little time as they need to complete the elementary school curriculum, rather than requiring them to proceed in lock-step with their classmates.

The early-1950s nongraded programs familiar to Goodlad and Anderson taught same-age children in self-contained classrooms. After publication, however, the authors encountered successful innovative programs that used *heterogeneous multiaged grouping* (see below) and team teaching. Recognizing that these two elements were extremely compatible with and facilitative of nongrading, they revised the book in 1963 to emphasize teaming and multiaged grouping (Robert H. Anderson 1992, Robert H. Anderson and Barbara Nelson Pavan 1993).

*The Nongraded Elementary School* inspired the creation of nongraded programs across the nation. Unfortunately, many of these programs simply grouped children homogeneously by achievement or perceived ability rather than by age (Lilian G. Katz 1992)—if they departed from graded practices at all. In the midseventies, American interest was attracted by *open education*, a British approach that shared many instructional and philosophical elements with the nongraded approach. Failures of some poorly planned open-education programs resulted in classroom chaos and negatively affected attitudes toward nongraded education (Joan Gaustad, April 1992).

Over the years, Anderson and various colleagues developed the concept of nongradedness into a "total educational philosophy" and extended its definition to include emerging instructional practices they judged to be philosophically compatible. Anderson and Pavan's 1993 book presents an 11-point "brief operational definition" of "authentic nongradedness," 36 "principles of nongradedness," and 204 "behavioral indicators." This expanded definition of nongradedness unquestionably encompasses all the practices considered in this Bulletin.

"Any assumption can be judged to be nongraded if the practices that it implies aid in development of the maximum potential of each individual," assert Anderson and Pavan expansively. The reader should be aware, however, that other authors, researchers, and practitioners use the term with far more restricted meanings. In this Bulletin, I use the term *nongraded* broadly and inclusively. I apply it to a broad range of organizational and instructional practices that are based on the assumptions described on pages 3 and 4 of the introduction, rather than on the assumptions that underlie the traditional graded model of education.

## Continuous Progress

*Continuous progress*, an integral part of the nongraded concept, can be visualized as a ramp, in contrast to graded education, which resembles a step-ladder. Whole-class instruction in a graded classroom is typically presented at a pace comfortable for the "average" learner, holding back faster learners while slower learners struggle to keep up. At year's end, students either move up a whole "step" to the next grade or remain on the same "step" for an additional year. The goal of continuous progress is to enable students to cover ground at their own pace, regardless of their age, neither spending extra time on material they have already learned, nor being rushed on to new material before they have mastered the prerequisites.

Programs seek to enable continuous progress in two main ways. In some programs, students make linear progress through a carefully organized sequence of curriculum in each subject area, working independently on individualized activities or with groups of other students functioning at the same level. At the beginning of each academic year, they pick up where they left off at the end of the previous year. This was a common approach in early nongraded programs.

The second approach, characteristic of more recent programs, seeks to provide unsequenced, open-ended situations such as project learning, cooperative groupwork, and individual exploration. In this nonlinear, more holistic conception of progress, students undergo "an individual expansion of knowledge, skills and understanding" (Barbara Nelson Pavan, April 1992) and "build progressively on their developing knowledge and understanding of themselves and their world" (Ministry of Education 1990b).

## Developmentally Appropriate Practices

*Developmentally appropriate practices* (DAP) can be briefly defined as "instructional practices and curriculum components which coincide with and foster developmental appropriateness" (Kentucky Department of Education 1993). Expanded definitions of this term fill whole books and continue to expand and evolve as research adds to the knowledge base.

The concept of *developmental appropriateness*, as articulated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), has two dimensions: *age appropriateness*, that is, appropriateness with reference to typical development of children as established by research; and *individual appropriateness*, or responsiveness to individual differences in pattern and timing of growth, learning style, personality, and family background (NAEYC 1987). Integrated curriculum, mixed-age grouping, and cooperative groupwork are examples of practices considered appropriate, while use of letter grades, heavy reliance on worksheets, and teaching of isolated subskills are deemed inappropriate.

Lilian G. Katz and Sylvia C. Chard (1989) break down the concept of development into two dimensions: *normative* and *dynamic*. The *normative* dimension concerns "matters such as what most children can and cannot do at a given age or stage." The less-commonly considered *dynamic* dimension has three aspects: change over time, the delayed impact of early experience, and the long-term, cumulative effects of frequent or repeated experiences. For example, occasionally feeling confused and incompetent may not be harmful, but repeatedly experiencing such feelings can cause children to label themselves as stupid and give up. "The developmental question is not so much what children can do, or even how they learn. The critical developmental question for educators is what young children should do that best serves their development in the *long term*," Katz and Chard emphasize.

Like *nongraded education*, the phrase *developmentally appropriate* is useful because it provides a concise means of referring to a large area of educational theory, philosophy, and associated practices. *Developmentally appropriate practices* could easily have been substituted for *nongraded* in the title of this Bulletin; all the elements of the "new instructional model" described in the introduction have been described as developmentally appropriate.

Like *nongraded*, however, the phrase *developmentally appropriate* is potentially problematic because it encompasses so much. According to education consultant Jim Grant, *developmentally appropriate* is politically "safe" terminology because individuals can interpret it to mean whatever is comfortable and acceptable to them. The danger is that if it is given too many different meanings, it may ultimately become meaningless.

## Grouping Terminology

Various names have been applied to the practice of teaching children of different ages in the same classroom. *Mixed-age grouping*, also called *dual-year grouping*, refers to placing children with an age range greater than one year together, while *multiaged* or *multiyear grouping* refers to an age range greater than two years. Sometimes, however, *mixed-age* and *multi-age* are used indiscriminately. *Family grouping*, *vertical grouping*, and *blends* or *blended classes* are alternative, less specific names for such classes. Whatever the label, the basic tenet of this type of grouping is that interaction among children of varying ages has social, emotional, and cognitive benefits clearly established by research (Lilian G. Katz and others 1990).

In this type of grouping, children typically remain with the same teacher for more than one year. The age range in a classroom remains constant, with some older students moving on and some younger ones joining the class each year. *Looping* (Jim Grant and Bob Johnson 1994) or *teacher*

*cycling* (John Goodlad and Robert Anderson 1987) is a related practice in which a teacher remains with a same-age class of children for more than one year. Team teaching is often associated with mixed- or multi-age grouping, creating clusters of classes that share activities, staff, and students, and that create more opportunities for subgrouping.

*Heterogeneous* grouping refers to grouping children who differ according to any criterion: age, perceived ability or achievement, learning style, and so forth. *Flexible* grouping refers to using various types of heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping for short-term purposes, as opposed to the long-term ability grouping often used in graded classes.

*Multigrade, split-grade, combined-grade,* or *combination* classes are those in which more than one grade level is taught in the same classroom, with grade labels and separate curriculum maintained for each group of students. Such classes are usually formed for economic reasons and are considered a second choice to the preferred single-grade model. This type of organization has a radically different philosophical base and uses different instructional approaches than do *mixed-age* or *multiage grouping*, but the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, without regard for these significant distinctions.

An interesting example of the way terms evolve and acquire new connotations to fit changing circumstances can be found in Grant and Johnson's *A Common-Sense Guide to Multiage Practices*. The authors define a series of terms to match a spectrum of practices they have observed in visiting classrooms across the nation. They identify *single-grade*, *combined-grade*, *multigrade*, and *multiage continuous progress* as models at different points along the graded/nongraded spectrum.

Leaving *combined-grade* its standard meaning, they define a *multigrade* class as one in which traditional grade labels are used but "there is an intentional blending and blurring of grade distinctions" and nongraded philosophy and practices are adopted to a large extent. The multigrade model may be a transitional stage between the graded and nongraded/multiage continuous-progress models, or simply a way of adapting nongraded practices to an overall district structure that is graded.

"It is difficult to introduce new designations, new words," Grant and Johnson comment. "It is far easier to go with the old words and concentrate on altering the rigid timeframe and the inappropriate practices and expectations that these words imply."

## Cooperative Learning

*Cooperative learning* is a teaching strategy in which small groups of children participate in learning activities that promote positive interaction

(Harvey C. Foyle and others 1991). Cooperative learning does not refer to incidental learning within accidentally formed groups of children, though children may learn much in such situations. Various forms of cooperative learning play a central role in nongraded education, though they were not developed specifically with mixed-age groups in mind and can be used within any of the grouping schemes described above.

Examples of cooperative learning methods include Elliot Aronson's Jigsaw Classroom method; David and Roger Johnson's Learning Together; Group Investigation, developed by Israeli researchers Schlomo and Yael Sharan; and the Student Team Learning techniques developed at Johns Hopkins University by Robert Slavin and others (Robert E. Slavin 1991).

*Positive interdependence* —the idea that a group of students working together can accomplish something none of them could have achieved individually—is the "heart of Cooperative Learning" (Foyle and others). Slavin identifies two essential elements for effective groupwork: *group goals* and *individual accountability*. Groups must be rewarded for joint success, and group success must depend on the successful learning of all the individual group members (Slavin 1991).

Elizabeth G. Cohen (1994) notes that for cooperative groupwork to be effective, tasks must be appropriate; some learning tasks don't lend themselves to groupwork. Group members must also possess the intellectual and social resources needed to successfully complete the task. Cohen explains general principles teachers can use to design groupwork formats appropriate to various types of learning tasks, describes the specific skills students need to work together successfully, and shows how to teach and reinforce those skills.

Many elements of cooperative learning, including positive interdependence, are shared by *peer tutoring*, which normally involves only two students (Katz and others). *Peer tutoring* is "a one-to-one teaching process in which the tutor is of the same general academic status as the tutee" (Jiska Cohen 1986). *Cross-age tutoring* is technically a more accurate term when tutor and tutee are not the same age, but the label *peer tutoring* is often applied to both situations. As in cooperative groupwork, both students learn, despite the designation of one student as the teacher. Research has demonstrated positive effects of tutoring on academic performance and attitudes of both tutor and tutee (Peter A. Cohen and others 1982).

The *project approach* elaborated by Katz and Chard combines *thematic study* (see below) with cooperative learning and mixed-age grouping. While many types of cooperative groupwork involve specific tasks that are completed in one group meeting, projects extend over a period of days or weeks, depending on the topic and the ages of the children involved.

## Integrative Education

*Integrative* or *integrated education* is a vast, complex area, the thorough exploration of which is beyond the scope of this Bulletin. After surveying a variety of definitions and perspectives, Betty Jean Eklund Shoemaker (1989) synthesizes them as follows: Integrative education "cuts across subject-matter lines, bringing together various aspects of the curriculum into meaningful association." Integrative education "reflects the real world, which is interactive. This interactive nature involves the learner's physical body, thoughts, feelings, senses, and intuition." Integrative-learning experiences "unify knowledge and provide a greater understanding than that which could be obtained by examining the parts separately."

*Theme studies* are a common means of integrating curriculum in the classroom. Shoemaker distinguishes two significantly different types of thematic organizers: *topics*, such as "dinosaurs," and *concepts*, such as "extinction." Concepts are more comprehensive and contain many specific topics, providing more varied options for teaching and learning. Like cooperative learning, *integrated* or *thematic* instructional approaches are compatible with various types of classroom organization.

The increasingly popular *whole-language* approach to literacy is also a form of integrated instruction. "It asserts that literacy is best taught in the meaningful context of literature and communication, rather than as a series of isolated subskills to be mastered step by step" (Joan Gaustad, March 1992).

## Authentic Assessment

*Authentic assessment* refers to a range of assessment practices unlike those used in traditional graded education, including classroom observation, collections of student work, and talking with students to discover the understandings and thought processes that underlie their actions. The Kentucky Department of Education (1993) defines *authentic assessment* as "assessment of what we actually want students to be able to do or understand." The British Columbia Ministry of Education (1990b) states that *authentic evidence of learning* "is selected in terms of program goals and learning experiences; reflects the regular conditions of the classroom; documents growth in children's actual 'products' rather than on work substitutes in contrived tasks; reflects some kind of real-life purpose, meaning or validity."

By contrast, "inauthentic" practices (1) do not accurately assess what students are learning, (2) assess mastery of tasks that are meaningless or irrelevant outside the classroom, or (3) do not provide useful feedback to guide future instruction. For example, competitive ABCDF or percentage grading tells little about the quality of a student's achievement, and merely reports how it compares with that of classmates.

### Going Beyond the Labels

It's important to go beyond the labels to substance. Many educators comment that it is difficult to change thinking while still using old labels. While this may be true, there is ample evidence that changing labels does not guarantee change in anything else (see next section).

Conversely, educators can make considerable change while retaining familiar labels. Grant and Johnson point out that unfamiliar labels may be more dismaying to parents (and some educators) than new practices, and may stimulate opposition to change. "'First grade,' 'second grade,' third grade' are only words. We can alter the amount of importance we give to them."

Labels can also obstruct change by implying that all the answers are known. After extensively conducting interviews with Kentucky educators, Raths and his colleagues concluded that some of the terminology used in the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act had an intimidating effect on teachers.

> The slogan-like character of the terms used to describe some of the attributes of the [Kentucky] primary school mandate is seen in the staking out of the high ground in the choice of words.... Can anyone be for "unauthentic assessment"? Can anyone espouse "developmentally inappropriate practices"? (James Raths and others 1992).

In reality, there exists considerable disagreement and discussion concerning these concepts among professionals in the field. But according to Raths and his colleagues, the impression of absolute correctness communicated by the labels discouraged discussion among teachers that could have helped clarify the concepts' meanings in terms of practical classroom situations.

Terms and their definitions can serve as a starting point for discussion and thought, rather than as an ending point. Grant and Johnson suggest that educators periodically reexamine educational "buzzwords" whose use tends to become automatic.

> What do we mean when we say "continuous progress"? That question is good for at least an hour of brainstorming. New ideas and fresh experiences add to our understanding of the term. It comes alive again as a vital concept that can affect what we do.

## Research and Its Limitations

It would be wonderful to have research results that clearly establish the comparative effectiveness of various nongraded instructional and organizational practices. But although definitive evidence exists for the effectiveness of some practices, for others research is currently insufficient or inconclusive. Strongly held opinions, however, always seem to be plentiful.

Even when a substantial body of research exists, it rarely produces the clear "Yes, X works; No, Y doesn't work" answers educators and the public would prefer. The research on nongraded programs demonstrates the complexity that is typical of research results. The correct general statement "research supports the effectiveness of nongraded programs" obscures tremendous individual variation among research studies and the specific programs they attempt to evaluate.

**Research Concerning Nongraded Programs: An Example**

Establishing the comparative effectiveness of graded and nongraded programs has been hampered by the fact that many early "nongraded" programs actually continued using graded practices. Anderson observes that nongraded labels were often applied to programs "more as expressions of intent than as titles of accomplishment" (Robert H. Anderson 1993). Many research studies may have obtained inconclusive results because the "graded" and "nongraded" classes compared were using similar practices.

Despite inconclusive studies, however, research evidence generally supports the effectiveness of nongraded programs. In a review of sixty-four research studies published between 1968 and 1990, Pavan found that students in nongraded classrooms performed as well or better than their graded counterparts in terms of achievement, mental health, and attitudes toward school, and that a nongraded environment is particularly beneficial for at-risk students (Barbara Nelson Pavan, October 1992).

A recent review of research by Roberto Gutiérrez and Robert E. Slavin (1992) attempted to determine the effectiveness of different types of nongraded programs, as well as sorting out poorly designed studies that muddy the waters. They considered five distinct categories of nongraded programs, sorting studies within each category according to methodological quality.

Categories 1 and 2 contained forms of nongraded organization in which students were "grouped according to their level of academic performance, not their ages," and made linear continuous progress through a hierarchical curriculum. In category 1 programs, students were grouped across grade lines just for reading or math. Category 2 consisted of comprehensive programs studied between the late 1950s and early 1980s. These programs involved two or more academic subjects, emphasized continuous progress, and used flexible, multiage grouping.

All sound methodological studies in category 1 "found substantial positive results for the nongraded program." Findings of studies in category 2, comprehensive programs, "are consistently in favor of the nongraded program. Almost all of its positive results are significant; not one study found significant differences in favor of the graded plan." Effects for both catego-

ries "were particularly strong and consistent in the higher-quality studies."

Categories 3 and 4 included types of nongrading that emphasized individualized instruction. Category 3 programs made extensive use of learning stations, activity packets, and other individualized activities, plus some small-group tasks; these programs were studied from 1969 to 1973 and in 1980. Category 4 included implementations of Individually Guided Education (IGE), a program developed at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1970s, studied from 1972 to 1985.

In category 3 studies, no significant differences were found between graded and nongraded programs. However, Gutiérrez and Slavin note that more positive effects were obtained with older children and in programs of longer duration. "It may be that students need a certain level of maturity of self-organizational skills to profit from a continuous progress program which includes a good deal of independent work," they suggest. Overall results were similar for category 4 studies; however, significantly favorable results were obtained for the nongraded programs whose implementation most closely matched the IGE model.

Category 5 included studies "that failed to state what was actually implemented in the nongraded programs they studied." For these studies, the median effect size was close to zero. "The value of these studies is perhaps in putting to rest the idea that simply giving a school an innovative label, in this case 'nongraded,' will have some effect on student learning," the authors comment.

Gutiérrez and Slavin make many other perceptive, thought-provoking observations on possible reasons for the results of particular studies, and I encourage readers to explore their work further.

Obviously, it is not enough to ask: "Are nongraded programs effective?" A better question is: "How effective is *this* type of nongraded program, *if* it is properly implemented?" Furthermore, most nongraded programs currently being promulgated don't fit into any of the categories described. According to Gutiérrez and Slavin, the verdict is still out on whether integrated and thematic instruction, incorporating four- and five-year-olds, and other practices associated with the movement toward developmental appropriateness have positive or negative effects on student learning.

### Time in the Nongraded Primary Classroom

That children learn and develop at different rates of speed is one of the core assumptions of nongraded education. One of Pavan and Anderson's organizational indicators of nongrading is that "more than a few" children will complete the primary program in more or less than three years. "Formerly, *time* was the constant in schooling," says Madeline Hunter (1992); in nongraded education, "*learning* has become the constant... the variable, now,

is the amount of *time* necessary for each student's success." Paradoxically, proponents of nongraded education who agree on this basic assumption disagree over how much time children should be allowed to complete their nongraded primary education.

In many programs, every effort seems to be made to move children along at the normative rate. In the only study in Gutiérrez and Slavin's review that examined rate of progress, fewer than 4 percent of nongraded students took more or less time than normal to complete a primary program, far fewer than are typically retained in graded programs. There appear to be three major reasons for this: retention paranoia, normative pressure, and more effective use of time in nongraded classes.

*Retention Paranoia.* Research has clearly established that retention in graded schools has more negative effects on academic achievement and attitudes than the also problematic practice of social promotion (Anderson and Pavan). The flexible, continuous-progress structure of nongraded education was designed to eliminate the drawbacks of both practices, and multiage grouping deliberately emphasizes and celebrates individual differences. Yet some nongraded proponents speak and act as if spending extra time in a nongraded primary program would impact children as negatively as retention affects children in graded programs, though I am unaware of any evidence of this (or even of any attempt to research the matter).

Jim Grant (1986), executive director of the Society for Developmental Education, vigorously disputes this belief. Grant maintains that even in graded programs, retention can be a positive choice—*if* the teacher and parents present it to the child in a positive light, allow the child to make the choice, and support the child's decision. Jim Grant and Bob Johnson (1994) and Bruce Miller (1994) describe children whose individual needs were best served by an extra primary year.

*Normative Pressure.* After 150 years of use, graded education is deeply embedded in American society, both structurally and attitudinally. Realistically, how easily can teachers allow children to progress "at their own pace" when a three-year "ungraded primary program" is followed by entrance into "fourth grade," and districts and some federal programs require children to take grade-oriented standardized tests? Gutiérrez and Slavin point out that "students (and, more particularly, their parents) can count, and they know who their classmates were when they entered school. The pressures to have students make normative progress may be as strong in nongraded as in graded programs." The fact that each year a child spends in the school system represents a substantial cost to the district may also put pressure on teachers.

*More Effective Use of Time.* As Gutiérrez and Slavin also note, children may make faster overall progress in nongraded programs because time is used more flexibly, thus more effectively. In a well-run program, children

who lag behind in a particular area are more likely to be identified and given appropriate, individualized assistance that enables them to "catch up" with their agemates by age nine or ten.

Many teachers laud the greater efficiency of multiyear classes. All staff members Miller interviewed at Portland's Boise-Eliot School "felt that in a straight-grade class, nearly four months of instructional time was lost—two months in the fall as everyone adapts to the new learning environment and two months in the spring when everyone adjusts to separating for the summer" (Miller). Multiyear classes also enable teachers to accumulate knowledge of learners for several years, instead of starting anew with all their students each fall, and to build stronger bonds with parents. Nonetheless, Grant expresses concern about the increasing tendency of educators and agencies to "take time out of their definition of developmentally appropriate practices."

### What Practices Are Currently Known To Be Effective?

The ineffectiveness or actual harm of certain graded practices—such as competitive goal structures; homogeneous treatment of heterogeneous students; and long-term, rigid ability grouping—is clearly supported by research (Anderson and Pavan 1993, John O'Neil 1992). Regrettably, the effectiveness of some nongraded practices suggested as replacements is not as well established. The reason is simple: Theories and practices continue to evolve as the "frontier of educational understanding and knowledge" continues to advance (Ministry of Education 1992).

The vast number of possible combinations of practices also complicates evaluation. It is difficult to determine the effectiveness of any particular practice when multiple innovations are being implemented simultaneously.

Unquestionably, properly structured cooperative-learning and peer-tutoring programs can be effective; evidence has established the effectiveness of specific programs as well as of underlying principles. There is strong evidence for the positive academic and social effects of mixed-age grouping, and, as seen above, for specific nongraded program configurations. Programs in Oregon, Kentucky, and other states consistently report decreased discipline problems, increased attendance, and more positive attitudes in mixed-age classes (Oregon Department of Education, December1993, Raths and others, Miller).

In other cases, evidence supporting nongraded practices is indirect. A number of instructional strategies based on knowledge of child development, cognition, social learning, brain functioning, and so forth are clearly well thought out and seem philosophically sound, but have not been tested under controlled conditions. When information becomes available concerning the effects on student learning of British Columbia's innovative Primary Pro-

gram, it will provide the first large-scale evidence on the effectiveness of its particular nongraded configuration, if not of all configurations.

British Columbia's experience with primary-education reform provides an example of the difficulties involved in translating a well-established knowledge base into curriculum and practice. A panel of impartial experts was selected by the Ministry of Education to evaluate the design of the province's new primary program, as embodied in the *Primary Program Foundation Document*. The reviewers were asked to respond to the question "To what extent do the Program philosophy, rationale, goals, and position statements reflect and represent current knowledge about the education of young children?"

The portions of the document summarizing current knowledge were generally praised. "Overall, the writers are to be commended for bringing together an enormous amount of research and theory into a comprehensive program," stated reviewer David Elkind (Ministry of Education 1992). Weak areas in the document were described as diagnostic of current deficiencies in educational knowledge and understanding.

But the curriculum section aroused vigorous disagreement. Reactions ranged from criticism of specific curriculum elements to a rejection of the entire curriculum section as inconsistent with the program's fundamental goals and principles. "How this learning paradigm gets translated into specific curricular guidelines is problematic not only for you but for the rest of us," acknowledged reviewer Judith M. Newman (Ministry of Education 1992).

Educators can't wait for definitive answers to emerge before they begin to replace practices known to be damaging. They must be guided by their own observation and common sense when evaluating innovative practices in their own schools and classrooms.

## Ignorance of the Change Process: A Recipe for Disaster

The manner in which implementation is planned and carried out may have more to do with a program's success or failure than the soundness of its underlying philosophy or its effectiveness as demonstrated by research. Knowledge of the change process is indispensable for administrators and planners considering nongraded practices, as well as extremely helpful for teachers.

Shirley M. Hord (1987) traces a dismaying pattern in the history of American educational innovation from the fifties through the seventies. Promising new programs were developed and introduced into schools at a rapid rate, sometimes several at a time. Typically it was assumed a program was "in place" once it was formally adopted and materials had been deliv-

ered to the schools. Teachers received little training or support as they struggled to master new theories and practices. One or two years later, evaluation would be conducted, to reveal no significant improvement in student performance. Concluding the program was at fault, planners would dump it, introduce another innovation, and begin the cycle all over again.

The real problem, says Hord, lay in administrators' and policymakers' mistaken assumptions about change. Realistically, successful implementation requires several years. Teachers—the key element in educational change—were rarely given sufficient time, training, and psychological support to assimilate the innovations and actually put them to use.

Unlike their predecessors, today's planners have access to the results of decades of research on change as well as anecdotal reports by practitioners. The Concerns Based Adoption Model, developed by researchers at the University of Texas at Austin after they studied educational change for more than a decade, is presented in *Taking Charge of Change* (Shirley M. Hord and others 1987), an excellent, concise handbook. Michael G. Fullan's *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (1991) is also an invaluable source.

There are striking similarities between the conditions identified by change researchers as conducive to successful school change and those described by nongraded experts as essential to the successful nongraded learning environment. These parallels are explored in later chapters of this Bulletin.

## Conclusion

Nongraded education is a vast and complex subject that cannot be mastered in a handful of workshops. Fortunately, teachers and administrators don't need comprehensive, expert knowledge to begin making changes. Solid knowledge in a relatively small area provides a good foundation to build on. Additional knowledge and skills are best added a bit at a time, as earlier learning is consolidated through experience. An understanding of underlying principles and theory is more important than mastery of an exhaustive list of specific techniques.

Educators need to know that even experts disagree and that many questions currently remain unanswered. They need to be comfortable with not having all the answers and confident in their ability to continue learning as more information becomes known.

Teachers and administrators don't need to know everything—but, if possible, they need to know the *limits* of their knowledge. Misunderstandings and out-of-context fragments of information can be more problematic than acknowledged ignorance, as is seen in the next chapter.

*Chapter 2*

# Avoiding Problems of Communication

An Oregon teacher recently told me a horror story. While attending a workshop on reading instruction, she overheard another teacher describing the new "whole language" program she was using in her first- or second-grade classroom. The teacher said, "At the end of this year, I couldn't have told you which kids in my room could read and which ones couldn't." This misinformed teacher had discontinued the use of basal readers and traditional graded assessment practices—without replacing them with alternative assessment techniques. Perhaps she did not know such types of assessment existed.

Nongraded concepts and practices have proved distressingly susceptible to such misunderstandings. Programs based on misconceptions or incomplete information may well be worse than the graded programs they replace. "There is nothing worse than a poor marriage, or unsuccessful nongrading," declares Hunter. In addition, even good programs can be threatened by parents alarmed by inaccurate perceptions of nongraded practices.

One cause of misunderstandings is incorrect or incompletely communicated information. Another cause is the misinterpretation of correct information. This chapter presents specific examples of misinformation and misinterpretation, explores the process by which misunderstandings arise, and discusses possible ways to avoid or reduce their occurrence.

## Misunderstandings of Nongraded Programs and Practices

Considering the number and complexity of the instructional elements that make up the nongraded approach, it is not surprising that understanding

is sometimes incomplete or skewed. When governments take positions on nongrading, government requirements and regulations provide additional fuel for miscommunication. Education reforms in Oregon and Kentucky and the province of British Columbia have all been troubled by communication problems.

### Oregon: Erroneous Information Propagated Nationwide

The erroneous news that the Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century "mandated" nongraded or mixed-age instruction at the primary level has appeared in numerous nationally distributed publications, including several otherwise excellent sources cited in this Bulletin's bibliography. A preliminary draft of the bill did contain such language (Gaustad, April 1992), but the final version of House Bill 3565 simply directed the state Department of Education "to recommend models for use by school districts for developmentally appropriate nongraded primary programs" and "to report to the 1993 regular session of the Legislative Assembly on the feasibility of all school districts implementing nongraded primary programs" (Oregon State Legislature 1991).

In January 1993, the Non-Graded Primary Task Force concluded that the "critical issue" is developmentally appropriate practices and that it is feasible for Oregon school districts "to implement developmentally appropriate practices in the primary program, kindergarten through grade 3." The task force *recommended* that the state require implementation by the year 2000, "that the term non-graded be changed to mixed-age," and that use of mixed-age grouping be left to the discretion of local school sites (Oregon Department of Education, January 1993a). *But the legislature chose to leave implementation totally voluntary*, said Anita McClanahan, early childhood education coordinator for the Department of Education, although the department supports and encourages the adoption of developmentally appropriate practices and mixed-age grouping.

However it originated, the error has been reprinted repeatedly, quoted by writers who presumably trusted the sources they were citing and did not verify the information with the state. This bit of misinformation may not be significant for casual readers in other parts of the nation, but, according to McClanahan, some Oregon school administrators are taking action based on this false information.

"We still get calls at the Department of Education from people asking, 'What's the deadline for implementing nongraded? When do we have to do it?' " she related. "We are very anxious to tell people that this is *not* the law. We really believe in staff development and teacher input, and that mixed-age grouping should *only* be implemented when teachers are prepared and ready

and when the community is involved." The department continues to gather and distribute information on model programs and to facilitate sharing among the nearly four hundred Oregon schools that voluntarily have begun implementing mixed-age programs.

### Kentucky: Multiple Versions of Compliance Circulate

The 1992 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), a far more comprehensive and radical legislative effort than Oregon's, has experienced proportionally greater communication problems. The mandated implementation of mixed-age grouping and developmentally appropriate practices at the primary level was just one of a number of major changes affecting the entire system, from preschool to high school levels.

In addition to learning and assimilating new instructional theories and practices, Kentucky educators have had to keep track of deadlines by which specified actions must be accomplished. Threatened sanctions for schools' failure to meet state requirements were a strong motivation for school staff to ascertain exactly what constituted compliance. The fact that the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) was abolished—all employees were officially terminated, then interviewed for new positions in the totally reorganized agency (Betty E. Steffy 1993)—undoubtedly contributed to the difficulty of obtaining clear, consistent answers during the first year of the reform process.

Raths and his colleagues report that multiple versions of what constituted compliance circulated among teachers and administrators during the first year of implementation. "We heard at least six versions of what the State Department of Education will accept as 'kindergarten involvement' in the primary school—from 10 minutes a week to every minute of every day of the week. Each person sharing her view vouched for its accuracy by citing an official of the Kentucky State Department of Education."

A year later, James Raths and John Fanning (1993) reported that problems still existed:

> In spite of the heroic efforts on the part of the Kentucky Department of Education to disseminate information about KERA to teachers and school administrators, there are some professionals in the schools we visited who either do not understand the law or are interpreting the law in such a way as to avoid substantive implementation of the mandate.

The consultants speculated that educators resistant to specific elements of KERA may "shop around," questioning different KDE staff until they obtained a more acceptable, less threatening answer, then triumphantly "broadcast" the information.

## British Columbia: Confusion about Anecdotal Reports

British Columbia's primary-education reform process was designed to occur gradually, over a ten-year period. But despite its carefully planned, systematic character, the implementation process still encountered some communication problems. In the case of anecdotal reports, one component of qualitative assessment, the problem was incomplete rather than inaccurate information.

The *Primary Program Foundation Document* states that anecdotal comments should describe "what the child can do; the child's interests and attitudes; the child's learning needs; the teacher's plan to support the child; and how the parents might assist with their child's learning." In the process of implementation, however, the first component—"what the child *can do*"—was often given disproportionate emphasis.

The Ministry of Education has been working to clarify the intent of the reform and improve the quality of written reports, said School Programs Elementary Coordinator Mary Nall. Guidelines recently issued by the Ministry of Education (1994) state that progress reports "must describe: a) what the student is able to do, b) what areas require further attention or development, and c) ways of supporting his or her learning." An additional guideline instructs teachers to communicate to parents how their child's progress compares to expected development for students in that age range. Nall stressed that, if possible, this information should be communicated orally during a conference, but it may also be written on the report card. The term *structured written report* has also replaced *anecdotal report* (Art Charbonneau 1993).

## Misconceptions about the Benefits of Mixed-Age Interaction

The benefits of mixed-age interaction for older children are often not understood, particularly in relation to peer tutoring. Studies conducted in Oregon, Kentucky, British Columbia, and in many other places report similar misconceptions. "I don't want my child spending all of his time teaching kids who don't know as much," and "What's my second-grader going to get out of this except babysitting?" are typical comments made by parents of older children (Miller). Both parents and teachers are quicker to perceive the potential benefits for younger children.

Some parents of younger children support mixed-age grouping for the wrong reasons, thinking placement with older children will stimulate their children to develop more rapidly. Richard Lodish (1992) explains:

> Parents arguing in favor of this view incorrectly employ a sports metaphor: "I like to play tennis with someone just a little better than I am. It keeps me on my toes and improves my game." My response is:

"How would you like to lose every game by just a little bit for the next five years, no matter how much you improve?"

Judy Guthrie Pasemko (1992) found similar perceptions in a survey of parents and teachers in two British Columbia school districts. Some parents whose children had spent a successful year as the youngest children in mixed-age classes wanted them to leave the program the following year to avoid being the oldest.

The teachers Pasemko surveyed generally understood how mixed-age grouping promotes cooperative learning but did not fully understand peer tutoring. Most thought peer tutoring benefitted tutees and helped relieve teachers' workloads; they did not understand the benefits for tutors. Pasemko noted the disturbing possibility that peer tutoring was being used "not for the benefits it offers learners, but to relieve pressures teachers are feeling in their classrooms."

In fact, the benefits of peer tutoring for tutors are at least as well established as the benefits for tutees. Organizing material to teach "facilitates long-term retention, as well as aiding in the formation of a more comprehensive and integrated understanding" (Jiska Cohen 1986). In addition to consolidating their own learning by reviewing and practicing material with their tutees, tutors have been found to gain in self-confidence and self-esteem and develop more positive attitudes toward the subject matter.

Students in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, explained these benefits in simpler words. "I like it that we can help the third graders, because if we forget, we can learn it again" and "When you help younger kids, it makes you feel happy, because you feel like you know everything" are sample comments from older students in mixed-age classrooms (Kathleen Cotton 1993).

Children benefit from opportunities to be helped and challenged by older students, *and* from opportunities to help and be looked up to by younger ones. Anecdotes abound concerning shy or insecure older children who blossom as leaders and role models for their younger classmates in mixed-age classes.

In age-segregated classes, children play the same role relative to their cohort of classmates year after year; the same students are always the youngest or oldest in their class. Mixed-age grouping gives *all* children the chance to experience both types of social benefits as they pass through the cycle, first being the youngest, then serving their turn as "senior citizens" and role models for a new crop of younger students (Anderson and Pavan). The flexibility of a well-designed nongraded classroom allows sufficient academic challenges for all children, whatever their level of functioning.

## Misconceptions about Classroom Organization and Structure

One of the most dangerous misconceptions is that mixed-age grouping is the one and only crucial factor. McClanahan said she periodically encounters educators who think,

> "If I mix ages then everything magically is going to change." But it's *not* just changing the configuration of students by age that will make a difference. You have to change your methods of instruction. It's what we *do* with the groups of children that makes a difference.

This misconception appears to be common in Kentucky schools, where the Appalachian Educational Laboratory found that mixed-age grouping was one of the most commonly implemented components of the state's new primary program (Kentucky Institute for Education Research 1993), despite the fact that the state department of education encouraged teachers to implement developmentally appropriate instructional practices such as thematic teaching, integrated language, and cooperative learning *before* mixing ages (Kentucky Department of Education, September 1992).

Hunter also stresses the priority of instructional quality over grouping pattern:

> A skilled teacher in any organizational scheme is better than a mediocre teacher in the best nongraded or team-taught school. The difference is that teachers and administrators in a nongraded school probably have more opportunities—and face more demands—to grow professionally, gaining new skills and insights.

Multiage grouping facilitates the use of developmentally appropriate practices that focus on students' individual needs. To express it another way, multiage grouping introduces so much diversity that continued use of graded methods is not feasible. Teachers at Lincoln School in Corvallis, Oregon, found that having a three-year age span in their classes promoted change because it forced them to break out of their deeply ingrained, graded mindsets. According to Bruce Miller, this is why most schools prefer mixed-age classes with only a two-year span—teachers can still hang on to a familiar, graded orientation, albeit with difficulty.

But if teachers are thrust into mixed-age grouping without first being given opportunities to acquire those new skills and insights, the most likely results are stress for the teacher and chaos in the classroom. Chapter 3 focuses on the practical skills teachers need to function effectively within multiage organization.

Another common misconception is that learning in nongraded classes is unstructured. A nongraded classroom does not have the same physical and social structure that a graded classroom has, but it most definitely does have structure. Nongraded classroom management and organization are explored in chapter 3.

## Why Do Misunderstandings Occur?

Miscommunication of simple information, such as the fact that Oregon does *not* mandate mixed-age grouping, should be easy to correct. But time and effort are required to communicate concepts as complex as those that underlie nongraded instruction. "Clear statements at the outset may help, but do not eliminate the problem; the psychological process of learning and understanding something new does not happen in a flash," emphasizes Fullan (1991).

### Change Is Learning

Many misunderstandings about nongraded education result from policymakers' mistaken assumption that information about complex innovations *should* be quickly and easily understood by people involved in the change. But communicating information to human beings is not like transmitting a FAX. "If we constantly remind ourselves that educational change is a *learning experience for the adults involved...* we will be going a long way in understanding the dynamics of the factors of change" (Fullan 1991) [emphasis in original].

Implementing any significant educational innovation involves at least three levels of learning, Fullan says. Learning to use new materials involves the easiest, most superficial level. Mastering new teaching approaches, which occurs at the second level, is more difficult. The third and most challenging level of learning involves comprehending new concepts or theories that support the new behaviors and materials.

Innovation at the third level often requires changes in deeply held beliefs and values regarding the purposes of education. These unstated assumptions may not be fully conscious. Addressing conflicts between the beliefs and assumptions underlying graded and nongraded instruction is an essential step in the learning process. For many educators, "unlearning powerfully held notions about how children learn" is a necessary prerequisite to understanding nongraded concepts (Miller).

Implementing nongraded practices involves change at all three levels.

### Beliefs and Attitudes Filter Learning

In a study of change in student teachers' knowledge and beliefs, Hollingsworth found that previous beliefs "filtered" their learning. By the end of the program, all the student teachers had superficially accepted the philosophy that was the basis for the program, but the depth of their understanding and their ability to translate that academic knowledge into actual

teaching behavior varied greatly. Some students seemed unable to go beyond the level of rote copying (cited in Fullan 1991).

Other students in the program were able to reexamine their beliefs and achieve new levels of understanding. Practice-teaching placements with teachers whose beliefs differed from their own appeared to aid this process. The disequilibrium forced them to rethink and reevaluate their own beliefs as they tried out different practices in the classroom. Placement with like-minded teachers resulted in less comprehensive learning, a tendency to rote copying of behavior, and less knowledge growth.

Charles Rathbone (1994) suggests that some cultural as well as individual beliefs make us hesitant to embrace nongraded practices:

> Shifting from gradedness conflicts with something deep within our national mythology. We continue to celebrate, almost wistfully, the icon of the pioneer who subdued the American frontier during the nineteenth century. The American pioneer exemplified an ethic where only the fit survived. This view... influences us to tolerate schools as a place where some individuals survive and others get weeded out.

Belief in the virtues of competition is another deeply ingrained American cultural value that may clash with nongraded concepts. Striving for excellence is often falsely equated with triumphing over other people—as if some children need to fail for others to succeed. Cooperative learning sounds like sacrilege to devotees of the competitive ethic.

Oregon private-school teacher Mary Owens told of one couple who pulled their elementary-age children out of school because cooperative learning was used. "They want their children to compete," she explained. "They want them to do their own work and get As, to be held up above others and be worshipped as academic achievers." The reluctant parents gave in at last, still vehemently opposed to cooperative learning, said Owens. "The sad look on this mother's face said, 'My children are being slighted,' when in reality, it's giving her two children, who really have leadership potential, an opportunity to excel in a different way."

### Change Is a Developmental Process

Shirley Hord and her colleagues (1987) argue that change is a process accomplished by individuals, not an event that can be decreed by policymakers. Change is a highly personal experience. Like children, adults react differently, learn and assimilate new information at different rates, and need different types and amounts of support and assistance to master new skills. Change efforts will only succeed if the focus is on the needs and concerns of the individuals making the change rather than on abstract goals.

Fullan (1991) agrees that the process of understanding, evaluating, and

choosing to reject or assimilate an innovation is highly individualistic. "People do not learn or accomplish complex changes by being told or shown what to do. Deeper meaning and solid change must be born over time... one must struggle through ambivalence before one is sure that the new vision is workable and right (or unworkable and wrong)."

### Forms of Nonchange: False Clarity and Painful Unclarity

If the beliefs and individual learning needs of educators are not considered, and if sufficient time is not provided, attempts at change are likely to result in some form of "nonchange," says Fullan. *False clarity*, one type of "nonchange," occurs when educators think they have accomplished significant change, but have only adopted superficial, oversimplified elements. Educators experiencing false clarity have unconsciously twisted and distorted key features of the innovation to fit into familiar frames of reference, all the while sincerely believing they understand the innovation.

Another variety of "nonchange," *painful unclarity*, "is experienced when unclear innovations are attempted under conditions that do not support development of the subjective meaning of the change." Forcing individuals to attempt implementation of innovations they do not understand results in "confusion, frustration, anxiety, and abandonment of the effort" (Fullan 1991).

### False Dichotomies

The simplistic perception of change as an all-or-nothing proposition is another obstacle to understanding. Miller encountered this problem in two of the four innovative schools he studied. Teachers at Overland Elementary School in Burley, Idaho, experienced hostility from staff at other district schools as their new multiage program began attracting positive attention. Overland's principal felt the hostile teachers "were viewing things in winner/loser terms.... 'Either Overland is doing it right and we are doing it wrong, or vice-versa'." The success of Overland's program was thus experienced as a personal threat.

Some teachers at Lincoln Elementary School in Corvallis, Oregon, opposed developmentally appropriate practices for similar reasons. "Many of the problems associated with the resistant teachers appear to be related to an either/or way of thinking. In other words, some individuals believed that there was only one right way to teach," reports Miller. If the innovative teachers were doing it "*right*," then the traditionalists must be doing it "*wrong*"—and had been doing it wrong throughout their entire single-grade teaching careers. It's easy to imagine how this perception—that the validity

of nongraded practices would invalidate an entire graded teaching career—could interfere with objective consideration of the practices' value.

Katz and Chard note that educational history is marked by exaggerated pendulum swings. An approach is enthusiastically embraced and implemented; a few years later, a countermovement overcorrects in the opposite direction; then the first approach is rediscovered and the cycle is repeated.

> Perhaps one reason the open education movement failed was that many teachers believed themselves to be in an either-or situation: they felt obliged to adopt *either* progressive-open *or* formal-traditional methods. Many believed they had to abandon all of their previous practices, but were not given sufficient support for embracing the new ones. (Katz and Chard)

This description may sound ominously familiar to many teachers today.

According to intercultural relations expert Edward T. Hall (1984), this is a typically American pattern. Americans "discard the old and eagerly clasp the new to our breast. We see this in our attitudes toward ideas, books, music, automobiles, styles," says Hall. "Even when we rediscover the old, it is treated as new.... Also, whenever anything new is incorporated or adopted—a belief, a life-style, or even a spouse—there are deep, unconscious patterns that make us feel we must automatically disavow the old." One could say that throwing the baby out with the bath water is an American tradition.

Michael Fullan (1993) also describes this tendency to drive good educational ideas to extremes. For example, the traditional professional isolation of teachers has many negative effects, and collaboration has many benefits, as is discussed in chapter 4. But when pushed too far, "collaboration becomes 'group-think'—uncritical conformity to the group, unthinking acceptance of the latest solution, suppression of individual dissent." Maintaining a balance between individualism and collaboration is far more constructive.

The whole-language/direct-instruction battle provides another example of dogmatic, all-or-nothing extremism. In a review of research, Russell Gersten and Joseph Dimino (1990) comment on the fervor with which whole language is sometimes promoted. Despite its many positive elements, however, research has found whole language to be "no more effective than conventional basal reading approaches." Gersten and Dimino cite Brophy's observation that effective classrooms with various labels typically use elements of both approaches. Direct instruction and whole language are necessary counterbalances for each other. The researchers predict the ultimate evolution of a synthesis incorporating the best elements of both approaches.

"Educators seem to exhaust themselves over issues such as phonics versus nonphonics, nongraded versus graded, and so forth.... Why we seem

always to organize our crusades around these ideologies of 'good' and 'bad' is not clear," said Ernest L. Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (American Association of School Administrators 1992). In many instances, the "correct way" may turn out to be a synthesis.

During the 150 years in which graded organization has dominated American education, there have been many excellent, inspiring, caring teachers who have given children successful, enjoyable learning experiences. If nongraded organization facilitates more successful teaching or success with a larger proportion of children, that should not be perceived as invalidating the successes achieved within the graded framework or the contributions of dedicated single-grade teachers.

## Advice on Reducing Misunderstandings

It is probably impossible to totally eliminate misunderstandings. Nonetheless, steps can be taken to reduce their occurrence. Here are a few suggestions for teachers and administrators.

1. *Don't trust unofficial sources such as magazine articles for accurate information on official regulations.* Publication does *not* guarantee accuracy! Confirm information with official sources before taking action, preferably verifying written information verbally and vice versa. Remember, people "mis-speak" and "mis-remember," printed sources sometimes contain typos, and changes can invalidate old information. Inconsistencies between sources should trigger your misinformation detector and prompt you to investigate further.

2. *Don't try to implement something you don't understand.* Don't fill in information gaps with guesses. Keep asking questions until you *do* understand. "The proper way to deal with confusion, observes Saul... is to increase that confusion by asking uncomfortable questions until the source of the difficulties is exposed" (Fullan 1993).

Don't feel embarrassed if things aren't clear immediately. Persist! Be stubborn! The problem may be that planners communicated poorly, or that the policy or program itself is vague or inconsistent. If proposed changes are ill-conceived, resisting them is the most responsible action (Michael G. Fullan and Matthew B. Miles 1992).

3. *Work to become aware of your own unconscious beliefs and assumptions.* Accept the possibility that some obstacles to understanding may originate within you.

This is a difficult process to accomplish alone. Have discussions with a supportive group of fellow educators, if possible. Anderson and Pavan

present a seventy-five statement inventory of educational beliefs and ideas, designed to stimulate agreement, disagreement, or uncertainty in the reader. They suggest readers respond to the statements privately, photocopy and distribute the list among colleagues to use as a basis for discussion, or both.

Read and reflect on statements of others' educational beliefs. Grant and Johnson print statements of beliefs and goals excerpted from five different sources. They suggest putting your own goals and beliefs in writing to clarify them for yourself.

4. *Keep updating your knowledge.* Never assume you know all you need to know; remember that the knowledge base keeps expanding. Learn from experts—but don't be intimidated by them; no one knows everything, and no one is as expert as you are on the characteristics of *your* classroom and the needs of *your* students.

5. *Resist that all-American impulse toward extremism!* Don't assume an idea is good because it's new, or bad because it's been around for a while—or vice versa. Uncritical reformist zeal and reflexive defense of the status quo can be equally destructive.

Critically examine both the new and the old. Discard what is invalid and integrate valuable old and new concepts and information. Maintain a balance; rather than one *or* the other, the best choice may be *both.*

6. *Support colleagues and subordinates in their personal processes of growth and change.* Recognize that you can't instantly transfer your own understandings and insights to others. Marris provides much food for thought in the following comment, cited by Fullan (1991):

> When those who have the power to manipulate changes act as if they have only to explain, and when their explanations are not at once accepted, shrug off opposition as ignorance or prejudice, they express a profound contempt for the meaning of lives other than their own. For the reformers have already assimilated these changes to their purposes, and worked out a reformulation that makes sense to them, perhaps through months or years of analysis and debate. If they deny others the chance to do the same, they treat them as puppets dangling from the strings of their own conceptions.

Most of these suggestions are unrealistic in the absence of a supportive school culture. Chapter 4 considers what this culture comprises and how it can be created.

## Conclusion

The accurate communication and comprehension of complex information involve much more than intellectual participation. Effectively explaining nongraded concepts and program configurations requires a sophisticated

understanding of the emotional and psychological aspects of learning and a respect for the individual differences of adult learners. Building accurate, in-depth understanding requires engagement in a demanding, risky, highly personal process.

This chapter has only dealt with the intellectual and emotional aspects of understanding. But fully comprehending nongraded education requires doing as well as thinking. As Fullan (1993) explains,

> People must behave their way into new ideas and skills, not just think their way into them. Mastery and competence are obviously necessary for effectiveness, but they are also *means* (not just outcomes) for achieving deeper understanding. New mindsets arise from new mastery as much as the other way around.

The practical skills whose mastery goes hand-in-hand with indepth understanding of nongraded education are considered in chapter 3.

*Chapter 3*

# New Instructional Skills for Teachers

Indepth understanding of the philosophy and research base behind developmentally appropriate practices and mixed-age grouping is essential for successful implementation. But theoretical knowledge is insufficient without mastery of the related practical skills. Who would want to be operated on by a surgeon who had read and studied anatomy texts, but had never held a scalpel?

Intellectual understanding of nongraded concepts, beliefs concerning their effectiveness, and competence in applying them in the classroom develop simultaneously. For example, teachers at Wascher Elementary School in Lafayette, Oregon, began reading research in 1990, but say they didn't really understand the mixed-age concept until they began implementing it in 1991 (Oregon Department of Education and Ackerman Laboratory School 1994).

Some elements of effective instruction are the same in traditional graded and nongraded classes, but many elements are significantly different. Teachers can't instantly acquire these new skills, yet some administrators seem to expect exactly that. Mary Owens expressed the frustration felt by teachers placed in this position. "It isn't the fact that the new teaching skills are difficult; the problem for teachers is the pressure to be proficient in something that you're not trained in. Somehow, you're just supposed to know how to do this," she said.

This chapter briefly surveys the instructional skills required in nongraded teaching and discusses effective ways for teachers to acquire these skills. It focuses in more detail on the process of maintaining order without graded structures.

## The Skills of the Ideal Nongraded Teacher

What practical skills and strategies should be in the repertoire of the ideal nongraded teacher?

To enable children of mixed ages and abilities to make continuous academic progress in the same classroom, teachers should know how to design open-ended, divergent learning experiences accessible to students at different levels of functioning. They should possess a varied repertoire of instructional strategies to draw upon in teaching students with different learning styles. They should be able to ascertain individual students' level of cognitive functioning; analyze their strengths, weaknesses, and learning characteristics; and quickly determine whether they have understood instruction, in order to provide each student with systematic skills instruction and practice in weak areas and appropriate challenges in areas of strength.

Teachers should know content-specific strategies, such as whole language, as well as how to integrate different content areas in project work. They should know how to develop and use appropriate themes; if children are in the same room for two or three years, as is typical, they must plan ahead so themes don't recur until complete student turnover has taken place. They should be able to design or adapt curriculum, since appropriate nongraded curriculum materials are often unavailable. They should know how to use nontraditional materials such as math manipulatives and learning centers.

Teachers in nongraded classrooms should also have expertise in "social engineering." They should be able to use various types of homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping for different purposes at appropriate times. They should know how to design cooperative group tasks, and know for what types of learning tasks cooperative groupwork is appropriate. They should know how to teach children prosocial skills and how to facilitate positive group interaction. Teachers should know how to plan and work cooperatively among themselves, with fellow teaching team members.

In addition to knowing how to teach knowledge and skills, teachers should know how to encourage positive dispositions such as curiosity, creativity, resourcefulness, independence, initiative, and responsibility in their students (Katz and Chard). They should know how to create an environment in which children enjoy learning and feel secure enough to risk making mistakes. They should know how to teach children to learn and problem-solve, to make choices, to evaluate their own work; to work independently and in groups; to be a responsible member of the larger classroom community.

Finally, teachers should be proficient in assessing, evaluating, and recording student progress using qualitative methods such as portfolios and anecdotal reports. They should be able to effectively communicate student

progress and explain nongraded concepts and strategies to parents.

This is a description of the *ideal* nongraded teacher. Obviously, mastering all the areas cited above would take years—perhaps an entire lifetime. Fortunately, like climbing Mount Everest, mastering nongraded educational methods consists of many small, achievable steps. You don't need to reach the summit in one giant leap; just take one step at a time.

Many developmentally appropriate practices can be implemented in graded classrooms. Some are already in use. There is also much carryover when moving from one practice to another. It really doesn't matter where you start—whole language, cooperative learning, theme teaching, project learning—all these practices ultimately connect. "All these things fit under an umbrella," testified Mary Owens. "They fit together, they weave together."

## Effective Ways for Teachers to Learn New Skills

The best place to learn new skills is in the context in which they are used—the classroom. Ideally, teachers should have opportunities to observe competent models demonstrating the new techniques, try out the techniques themselves, receive feedback on their efforts, reflect on the experience, revise, and try again. It is helpful if teachers can support each other's learning by observing and giving mutual feedback and suggestions.

### Instruction from Experienced Practitioners

One workshop with an experienced practitioner is worth a thousand pages of theory to teachers trying to implement nongraded practices. In 1992, Kentucky primary teachers voluntarily implementing the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) ahead of schedule were anxious to obtain more technical assistance. But they emphatically told Raths and others, "We do not need help from university profes. ors. We need help from classroom teachers who have been successful working in multi-age sites with thematic curricula."

When Raths and Fanning revisited these schools in 1993, they found increased understanding and confidence and more support for KERA:

> One source of the confidence we saw was the fact that since last spring they have received quite a bit of effective "training" from teachers and specialists. They again told us the best training was given by persons "who had been there" and who knew the problems inside and out.

British Columbia surveys have also consistently found that "teachers

learn best from other teachers." In collaboration with the province's teachers' federation, the Ministry of Education sponsored the preparation of primary teachers as "curriculum associates," available to give workshops to their colleagues. Some districts appointed "helping teachers" or "primary consultants" to present demonstration lessons and workshops, arrange summer institutes, and so forth; other districts organized groups of teachers to provide this type of support (Ministry of Education, Winter 1994).

### Classroom Visits and Observation

Visiting classrooms to observe nongraded practices in action is an invaluable aid to educators, whether they are well into implementation or considering starting a program. Primary teachers developing a nongraded pilot program at Westmoreland Elementary School in Eugene, Oregon, found school visits valuable in several ways. They spotted interesting new techniques to take home and try, felt supported when they saw other schools successfully using methods similar to theirs, and, most validating of all, sometimes liked their own adaptations even better than the methods others were using (Gaustad, April 1992).

The Oregon Department of Education is doing its best to facilitate such visits. It has prepared a resource book containing information on over a hundred (95) mixed-age programs around the state, including descriptions of each program's evolution and its readiness to receive visitors (Oregon Department of Education and Ackerman Laboratory School). McClanahan said the department plans to send copies of the guide to all the state's public schools this fall, with a cover letter requesting information on programs not yet included. Updates on additional programs will be distributed later for insertion in the loose-leaf, three-hole-punched resource book.

Two national multiage organizations, the National Alliance of Multiage Educators (NAME) and the International Registry of Nongraded Schools (IRONS), maintain lists of nongraded programs all over the country for educators interested in arranging classroom visits (Jim Grant and Bob Johnson 1994).

Videotapes provide opportunities for observation without the time and expense of travelling. Videotapes actually have some advantages over real-time observation, as Raths and others point out. They can be viewed during convenient lulls in otherwise busy schedules; taken home by individuals or shown and discussed at group meetings; and stopped, rewound, reviewed, and analyzed at leisure, unlike fast-moving interactions in real classrooms.

Kay Ann Wilborn, principal assistant in the Kentucky Department of Education's Office of Communication Services, explained that the department has made extensive use of Kentucky Educational Television, broadcast-

ing programs on various aspects of KERA to be watched and videotaped by educators around the state, as well as producing a series of videotapes aimed at parents. The Society for Developmental Education has produced videotapes on the "nuts and bolts" of teaching in multiage classrooms that are nationally available by mail order.

**Integration of Training and Practice**

The old adage "If you don't at first succeed, try, try again" is incomplete as it stands. New skills will be mastered more successfully if teachers have time between trials to reflect on what happened, evaluate what worked and what didn't, and make modifications. According to Stallings, "try, evaluate, modify, try again" is one of the four cornerstones of effective staff development (cited in Fullan 1991).

It is not necessary to have perfect theoretical understanding before implementing new practices. The theories behind the methods will make more sense after each attempt to use them. Training sessions should be scheduled on an ongoing basis, not in a single block that ends before implementation begins.

"Start before you think you know it all" is good advice for programs as well as for individuals. One Oregon educator recommends that schools establish a good basic knowledge base, then create some short-term trial situations to try out new practices. "Don't wait until you have everything perfectly in place in the minds of everybody to initiate. We found some of the things we thought looked good on paper didn't necessarily work like we thought they would" (Oregon Department of Education and Ackerman Laboratory School).

Theoretical models always need adjustment to fit reality, and this is particularly true in the case of nongraded education, which encourages variation as opposed to graded standardization. Practices should be modified to suit the strengths, preferences, personalities, and teaching styles of individual teachers and their team members, as well as the characteristics of the learners in their classes. No two nongraded classrooms operate in exactly the same fashion.

It takes time to discover which patterns work best for each class, team, and school. Grant and Johnson suggest educators start small, building on instructional elements that are already successful and gradually incorporating compatible new ideas and practices. "Inventory your strengths," they suggest. "What works well for you? What aspect of your teaching makes you feel really good? Don't throw that out."

Learning with other educators makes this process easier. Teachers may find it helpful to pair up and take turns trying new methods and giving each

other feedback. "You are not a good observer when you are trying to do something new and different like introducing and running groupwork," says Elizabeth Cohen. An observer will notice things the active partner misses while concentrating on managing the logistical details of a new practice.

Meeting in groups to discuss and share experiences provides important psychological support and encouragement, as well as broadens insights and perspectives. Different people will make different mistakes and invent different variations of a new method. Learning from each other's errors and sharing discoveries about what works enables everyone in the group to develop a comprehensive repertoire of successful adaptations more rapidly.

## Maintaining Order in the Nongraded Classroom

> Welcome to our multi-age classroom! The children move about their colorful, print-rich environment working individually or collaborating in small groups. They share, discuss, and investigate ideas with other children, parents, and teachers. There are no desks to limit their mobility.... Students learn at their own pace without grade level barriers to restrict their progress. They initiate their own learning, pursue their personal daily goals, and participate in a variety of self-selected activities. (Bev Maeda 1994)

Adults who attended traditional graded classrooms might be skeptical of the classroom organization described above. If graded rules and discipline aren't enforced, won't most primary-age kids be more likely to run wild than to engage in constructive, self-disciplined learning?

Probably so, if the old rules are abandoned abruptly. Creating a multiage classroom that functions as smoothly as the one described above requires careful planning and the step-by-step teaching of responsible, self-directed behavior. It doesn't happen by magic, and it doesn't happen overnight. Maeda says such a program "evolves over many years."

Six-year-olds don't know graded rules and expectations when they walk into their first-grade classrooms on the first day of school. Teachers instruct them in appropriate behavior: Sit quietly in your desk, eyes and attention on the teacher. If you want to speak, raise your hand and wait for the teacher to call on you. Don't talk to other children during lessons. Do your work by yourself; copying from other students is cheating. Year after year, teachers praise appropriate behavior and reprimand infractions until students gradually internalize the rules; eventually, self-discipline and social norms, as well as external discipline, guide students' behavior—at least that is the goal!

Children must also be taught the rules and expectations that govern the nongraded classroom. Children must learn the social norms and master the

social skills that enable them to work cooperatively in pairs and small groups. They must learn to work independently: to make choices, manage their time, and solve problems without constant direction from the teacher. Teachers must model, teach, and reinforce these norms and skills over time—after they have learned how to teach them, which also won't happen overnight.

### Why Order Is Important

Renate Caine and Geoffrey Caine (1994) describe two states of mind that affect learning in radically different ways. The first, *downshifting*, occurs when an individual feels threatened or helpless, and involves a retreat to more primitive types of brain functioning characterized by a rigid reliance on established behavior patterns, reduced responsiveness to the environment, and inability to perform complex learning and problem-solving activities. The second, *relaxed alertness*, facilitates meaningful learning and creativity.

Orderliness in the classroom helps foster relaxed alertness. "The brain downshifts in excessively unruly and unpredictable conditions, or... when there are few borders and too many choices," state Caine and Caine. "Creative teaching cannot flourish in total chaos." On the other hand, coercion and threat also cause downshifting. Teachers must maintain a balance between freedom and control, offering choices, variety, and opportunities for spontaneity within a predictable framework that gives children a sense of security. "An optimum amount of routine and order is liberating," Lilian Katz and Sylvia Chard (1989) agree.

Caine and Caine describe this optimal balance as "fluid orderliness." This differs from the traditional concept of classroom order in that it deemphasizes power and control in favor of a shared sense of acceptable behavior and respect for the feelings of others. To make this work, teachers must relax direct control and take a greater role as models and facilitators.

### Structuring the Day

A whole-class meeting often starts and ends the day in a nongraded classroom, providing a sense of community and closure. In between, blocks of time are allotted for activities involving individual work and tasks involving groups of various sizes. Some activities, such as math and language, may be mandatory every day, while others are optional. The teacher or teachers "orchestrate" events, balancing teacher-directed and student-selected tasks, high-energy and low-energy activities, planned and spontaneous learning opportunities, one-time tasks and projects that last for weeks.

To an observer stepping into the class at random, events at one particular moment might appear chaotic. The average noise level would cer-

tainly be higher than in a graded classroom! But over the course of an hour, a day, a week, or a month, the observer would see ordered patterns emerge. As the British Columbia Ministry of Education (Winter 1994) explains, the "disorder" of a nongraded class is "as superficial as the unruliness of a marketplace. To anyone who watches closely, a great deal of purposeful activity and learning is going on."

For this "marketplace" to function, the students must first learn the skills they need to work independently and in groups without constantly turning to the teacher for direction. Teachers must invest considerable time in teaching these social and academic skills and establishing classroom routines. In the long run, however, this enables teachers to devote less time to discipline and more time to teaching. "No longer having to perform as lecturer has freed the teacher to keep an eye on individuals, trace their behavior, and move about the room intervening here and there with individual assistance—often in the form of direct instruction in skills" (Ministry of Education, Winter 1994).

### Establishing Class Rules and Social Norms

Nongraded classrooms need clear, enforceable rules. Usually care is taken to phrase rules positively. For example, "Everyone deserves to be treated with respect and courtesy" might be used instead of "Put-downs are not acceptable."

Teachers explain, model, and enforce rules and expectations starting with the first day of school. Class rules are conspicuously posted around the room, along with instructions for specific procedures such as cleaning up and putting away supplies after painting. Students beginning their second or third year in the class reinforce classroom norms. They eagerly explain the rules, remind younger students of them, and model appropriate behavior, perhaps behaving better themselves than they would without that responsibility. Individual students may also be appointed to see that specific rules are followed, as in Maeda's classroom, where "class custodians" supervise cleanup. Younger students are eager to imitate the more capable older students and gain their approval. The considerable power of peer norms, which so often encourage destructive behavior such as drug use and gang involvement, is thus harnessed in the service of learning.

Students often participate in establishing the rules as well as enforcing them. Grant and Johnson present a sample list of six rules one multiage classroom might develop:

1. We help each other.
2. We respect other people and their things.
3. We encourage each other.

BULLETIN IN BRIEF

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# Nongraded Education

## Overcoming Obstacles to Implementing the Multiage Classroom

*by Joan Gaustad*

Nongraded instructional practices such as mixed-age grouping, developmentally appropriate practices, continuous-progress learning, integrated or thematic instruction, and cooperative learning are being implemented with increasing frequency in schools across the nation. These closely associated practices challenge the traditional graded model of education. Unfortunately, they have proved distressingly vulnerable to misinterpretation, distortion, and hasty or ineffective implementation.

### A Shifting and Expanding Knowledge Base

To successfully use nongraded methods, teachers need more indepth knowledge of child development and a larger repertoire of instructional strategies than most graded teachers possess. But acquiring the requisite knowledge and skills is complicated by the fact that the knowledge base is incomplete. Research has clearly demonstrated the ineffectiveness or actively damaging nature of certain graded practices, such as competitive goal structures and long-term, rigid ability grouping. However, the effectiveness of nongraded practices suggested as replacements is not always well established.

The terminology associated with the nongraded "family" of instructional practices can also be confusing. Different terms may be used for identical concepts or practices, while the same term is applied to quite different practices or used with significantly different connotations.

Educators can't wait for definitive answers and uniform terminology to emerge before they begin to replace practices known to be damaging. They must learn to look past the labels to the substance of practices and programs and let observation and common sense guide them in evaluating whether practices benefit their students. Teachers become partners with researchers as they refine evolving techniques in the classroom.

### Ignorance of the Change Process

It is vital for educators considering nongraded practices to understand the change process as well as the principles underlying nongraded practices and the differences between various program configurations. Research reveals that innovations often fail because administrators and policymakers give teachers insufficient time, training, and psychological support to assimilate the innovations and put them to use (Hord and Others 1987). Realistically, successful implementation requires several years and teachers need individualized, ongoing technical and emotional support.

The Oregon School Study Council—an organization of member school districts in the state—is a service of the College of Education, University of Oregon.

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## AVOIDING PROBLEMS OF COMMUNICATION

Misunderstandings concerning nongraded programs may arise from incorrect or incompletely communicated information, or from misinterpretation of correct information. Government requirements and regulations often provide fuel for misunderstandings. Education reforms in Oregon, Kentucky, and British Columbia have all encountered communication problems.

One of the most common—and dangerous—misconceptions about nongrading is that mixed-age *organization* is the crucial factor. But mixed-age grouping simply facilitates nongraded instructional methods. Chaos is likely to result if teachers are thrust into mixed-age grouping without first having opportunities to learn the appropriate teaching skills. Another common misconception is that learning in nongraded classes is unstructured. In reality, the physical and social structure of a nongraded classroom is simply *different* from that of a graded classroom.

### Why Do Misunderstandings Occur?

Considering the number and complexity of the instructional elements that make up the nongraded approach, it is not surprising that understanding is sometimes incomplete or skewed. Many misunderstandings result from policymakers' mistaken assumption that information about complex innovations *should* be quickly and easily understood by people involved in the change.

Communicating information to human beings is not like transmitting a fax. "If we constantly remind ourselves that educational change is a *learning experience for the adults involved* . . . we will be going a long way in understanding the dynamics of the factors of change" (Fullan 1991). Effectively explaining nongraded concepts and practices requires a sophisticated understanding of the emotional and psychological aspects of learning and a respect for individual differences in adult learners.

Adult learning is filtered by the learner's beliefs and attitudes. Some of the assumptions underlying nongraded education may conflict with deeply held beliefs and values regarding the purposes of education. Cultural values, such as the American belief in the virtues of competition, may also interfere with objective consideration of nongraded practices, such as cooperative learning. Building an accurate, indepth understanding of the nongraded approach is a demanding, highly personal, developmental process.

### Implementing 'Nonchange'

If the beliefs and individual learning needs of educators are not considered, and if sufficient time is not provided for genuine assimilation, change efforts are likely to result in some form of "nonchange," says Fullan: either *painful unclarity* or the more subtly dangerous *false clarity*, in which educators unconsciously distort and oversimplify elements of the innovation to fit it into familiar frames of reference.

## NEW INSTRUCTIONAL SKILLS FOR TEACHERS

While some instructional skills are the same in traditional graded and nongraded classes, others are significantly different. Mixed-age teachers must be able to design open-ended, divergent learning experiences accessible to students at different levels of functioning. They must possess a varied repertoire of instructional strategies to draw upon in teaching students with different learning styles. They must know how to use various types of homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping and how to design cooperative group tasks. They must be proficient in assessing, evaluating, and recording student progress using qualitative methods such as portfolios and anecdotal reports.

Nongraded teachers must learn to relinquish direct control in favor of subtler forms of classroom management. They should model desired behavior and share the responsibility for enforcing class rules with their students. They must know how to facilitate positive group interaction and how to teach students prosocial skills and independent learning skills.

Like climbing Mount Everest, mastering developmentally appropriate practices consists of many small, achievable steps. Many practices, such as cooperative groupwork and use of portfolios, can be implemented gradually in graded classrooms and expanded as they become comfortable and familiar.

The best place to learn new skills is in the context in which they are used: the classroom.

Ideally, teachers should have opportunities to observe competent models demonstrating the new techniques, try out the techniques, receive feedback on their efforts, reflect on the experience, revise their plans, and try again. Training is most successful when provided on a long-term basis and integrated with opportunities to deepen theoretical understanding.

## A Supportive School Culture

Teachers support learning in their students by establishing a classroom culture that is academically and emotionally supportive of learning, an environment in which it is safe to attempt challenging activities and risk making mistakes. Each learner is given feedback, encouragement, and individualized help, not vague admonitions to do better, unflattering comparisons with faster learners, or threats of punishment.

This type of learning environment is also beneficial to adult educators. Implementing nongraded practices can be stressful and frustrating; it is difficult to abandon old methods we employ with confidence for unfamiliar ones with which we feel inept. Teachers mastering new instructional skills need reassurance as much as they need technical support.

### Support from Colleagues

Support from fellow teachers makes it easier to master nongraded methods. Collaborating in coteaching or team teaching enables teachers to combine their skills and perspectives, share effective instructional techniques, and give each other feedback and suggestions. Many teachers say they feel revitalized by the professional interaction and sustained by the emotional support that is part of teaming.

Simply putting groups of teachers together doesn't guarantee productive collaboration, however. To team successfully, teachers must be willing to learn new skills and to share skills, materials, territory, and recognition for achievement. Not every group of teachers has the right chemistry to work together.

All teachers need to feel supported by the school community, whether or not they are members of a team. Innovative efforts by individuals or small groups of teachers can split the school's teachers into "pro" and "con" subgroups. Maintaining a sense of community and an overall school culture supportive of teacher learning is primarily the principal's responsibility.

### The Principal's Role

In many ways, the principal's role in the school parallels the teacher's role in the nongraded classroom. The principal should provide teachers with opportunities to learn nongraded teaching methods, monitor the progress of implementation, and give teachers praise, feedback, and suggestions. The principal should ensure that all teachers feel supported, wherever they are on the developmental spectrum of change, while pushing for continual professional growth. Ideally, the principal should be adept at facilitating positive, cooperative interactions among team members and among the entire teaching staff.

Fulfilling this role requires sophisticated leadership and interpersonal skills, as well as personal characteristics such as patience, empathy, and the ability to share power. But most administrators have received little or no formal training in these skills. Like teachers, principals need opportunities for professional development and for interaction with colleagues who are facing similar challenges. Principals need support from the district as they learn about nongraded education and develop the skills they need to facilitate change.

## Sufficient Time and Money

Surmounting the obstacles to nongraded education requires sufficient time and money. Without these essential elements, well-intentioned change efforts can create teacher burnout and replace a problematic graded system with half-baked, pseudo-nongraded chaos.

### Implementation Is Time-Consuming and Expensive

Allowing sufficient time for implementation cannot be overemphasized. It takes time for teachers and administrators to learn and assimilate the knowledge that supports nongrading and to master new instructional and change-facilitation skills. Educators need time to reflect, find meaning, integrate old and new understandings, and practice collaboration. According to Fullan (1991), imple-

menting a significant innovation should be expected to take at least two or three years; institutional reforms, five years or more. Individual districts, schools, and educators may require more or less time to reach such goals, depending on their starting points and access to expertise and financial support.

In educational change, time often translates into money: money to pay for staff development workshops and ongoing technical support, for release time to enable teachers to attend those workshops and to discuss and plan changes with their colleagues. Money is also needed to purchase developmentally appropriate instructional materials and furniture for classrooms, and resources such as books and videotapes for adult learners. Reform efforts in British Columbia, Kentucky, and Oregon clearly reveal the interaction between time, money, and implementation success.

### Maintaining Nongraded Education Is Also Costly

Even after the demands of implementation have subsided, maintaining quality nongraded instruction requires more time than maintaining graded education. Paying teachers for the additional time involved in collaborating, planning individualized instruction, and conducting qualitative assessment is costly, but necessary. Teachers will often invest immense amounts of unpaid personal time in the first few years of implementation, but few are willing or able to maintain such sacrifice on a long-term basis. Nongraded methods will gradually fall out of use if time to maintain them is not included in the school schedule.

## Implications for School Boards and Administrators

Successful implementation requires the support and involvement of administrators and policymakers at all levels. District tasks include communicating information and facilitating communication among staff, parents and community members; prioritizing potentially valuable innovations that compete for limited time and resources; coordinating changes among sites; removing regulatory barriers; providing technical and psychological support; monitoring and evaluating progress; setting realistic deadlines; and providing financial support.

District leaders can serve as models for their staff by becoming "continuous learners" themselves, seeking out the new knowledge and skills they need to facilitate change effectively. Ideally, a continuous chain of support for nongraded education should link district administrators to principals, principals to teachers, and teachers to students. Just as grade-level distinctions are blurred in mixed-age classrooms, divisions in the educational hierarchy should be deemphasized in favor of a collaborative model in which students, teachers, and administrators support each other as they work toward common goals.

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4. We keep a safe classroom.

5. We keep ourselves healthy.

6. We clean up after ourselves.

Penelle Chase and Jane Doan (1994) describe how the process of goal-setting evolved in their multiage class. The first year's rule-setting meeting produced "a long, complicated list of guidelines with accompanying positive and negative consequences." The following year, students and teachers pared down the cumbersome list considerably, but as the year progressed, it, too, seemed unsatisfactory. At the start of the third year, after considerable discussion, the class came up with a single, all-encompassing rule: Treat others as you would like to be treated. Chase explains that this familiar rule was both easy to remember and applicable to every imaginable situation.

> You listen to others because you would like others to listen to you. You don't cut in front of someone else in line, because you would hate it if someone cut [in front of] you. You help someone else with a math problem, because you yourself might need some help someday.... You take care of your own used tissues, because you would be disgusted to find someone else's dirty tissues in your environment. This philosophy covers everything!

## Discipline, Positive Reinforcement, and Peer Power

The power of positive reinforcement in maintaining discipline is not to be underestimated, particularly when it is linked to peer norms. Chase describes an incident during a whole-class lesson in her classroom. While her coteacher conducts the lesson, she observes, noting positive student behaviors on post-its that she later adds to students' folders. A child observer does the same thing. At the end of the lesson, the observers comment.

> Every eye is directed toward the observer's table. This day, just turned six-year-old Hollis reads from the string of post-its in front of him. "I noticed that Tracy paid attention to the message even though Dan was trying to talk to him. I saw Krista move so that she could see the message better. Darcy did good sound spelling to spell *interesting* on the chart." The children who have been singled out for recognition are beaming. (Chase and Doan)

Positive recognition from the teacher is certainly motivating for children, but recognition from peers is also powerful.

## Teaching Independent Learning Skills

Admonishing students to work independently is unlikely to produce the ability to do so. "If learners are to become independent, teachers must

assume responsibility for teaching the behavior of 'learning independently,' just as they teach reading," says Madeline Hunter (1992). She lists twenty-one separate capabilities required for successful independent learning, including the abilities to select an appropriate place to work, to follow directions, and to make appropriate choices.

These skills need not be fully mastered before a student attempts independent work. "In fact, *the most effective way to learn these skills is through guided, monitored, and reinforced practice*" (emphasis in original). Hunter describes types of activities at three different levels of independence and explains how teachers can guide and reinforce students to help them attain higher levels of independence. Videotapes showing examples of these teaching strategies are also available (Hunter).

### Teaching Social Skills

Simply putting children together won't produce positive social benefits. As Katz and Chard point out, children learn both appropriate and inappropriate behavior from interaction with peers. Also, some children may enter the classroom with maladaptive social skills that prompt other children to avoid or reject them. Adult intervention is necessary to teach effective social strategies and foster positive interactions.

Like independent work skills, social skills are best taught in context. "For young children, social competence cannot usually be achieved from direct instruction. But teachers can help them by suggesting and teaching them effective social strategies during ongoing, purposeful, social interaction" (Katz and Chard). This would be difficult in a graded classroom in which instruction involves primarily teacher-student interactions and most social interaction between children occurs at recess. But in nongraded classrooms, teachers have many opportunities to observe and gently intervene, positively reinforcing more appropriate behavior and gradually reducing their guidance as children's social skills improve.

### Teaching Peer-Tutoring and Cooperative-Learning Skills

Peer tutoring and cooperative learning have been shown to be extremely effective, but only if tutors and group participants are trained to use effective strategies. In particular, tutors must be trained to use positive reinforcement rather than resorting to negative practices such as threats (Jiska Cohen 1986). These skills are taught to all students in the nongraded classroom and are used in daily interaction with classmates, rather than being reserved for a special relationship designated as "peer tutoring."

Cooperative groupwork requires more complex skills. For example,

the response of an untrained student to a request for help at a learning center will probably be to give the correct answer or do the task for the other person rather than demonstrating or explaining what to do. Other examples are listening skills and responsiveness to group needs. Such skills can't be effectively taught by lecturing, says Elizabeth Cohen (1994). She explains general principles for teaching new behaviors to children or adults, presents games and exercises that teach cooperative-learning skills, and suggests strategies designed to resolve problems such as dominance battles and perceived status differences among group members.

Foyle and others present many cooperative activities for young children and discuss theoretical considerations related to groups of activities with similar goals.

### The Teacher as Role Model

That children are more likely to copy what adults *do* than to do what adults *tell them to do* is not a new revelation. Modeling academic and social skills is an important instructional tool in the nongraded classroom. Modeling values and attitudes is also important.

For example, Katz and Chard describe how the teacher "can provide a model of an interested listener" in classroom discussion. "Her comments on the children's talk also model appropriate replies and reflections on what another person says in a conversation." Encouraging open-ended discussion *among* children by listening and participating, only providing occasional low-key guidance, is radically different from directing so-called "group discussions" by asking questions with the goal of eliciting specific responses from children.

Doan describes how she and her coteacher model desired behavior and attitudes for their students:

> Mini-lessons in reading and writing often consist of us modeling how to have a writing conference, how to share a book with a friend, or how to collaborate on a story.... Co-teaching also gives us the opportunity to constantly model for the children how two people collaborate. (Chase and Doan)

When the pair decided to begin using portfolios in their classroom, they introduced the idea to their students by showing their own portfolios from a graduate education course they had taken at the University of Maine. "Our experiences have convinced us that the best teaching tool is being a learner. By modeling what we do as learners, we lead the children to become learners themselves," Doan states.

### Changing Roles: A Difficult Challenge for Many Teachers

Relinquishing direct control is difficult for many teachers. When teachers fail to delegate authority and try to supervise groupwork closely, students have fewer opportunities to interact. Elizabeth Cohen and others have found that more learning occurs in classrooms where teachers prepare students well for groupwork, then allow them to work out problems by themselves (cited in E. Cohen).

Raths and his colleagues found relinquishing control to be a consistent problem for the Kentucky teachers they interviewed. Although some classes did use elements of cooperative learning, others were structured so that children worked independently except when receiving help from adults.

> For the most part, the activities in which children were engaged in the schools we visited were teacher directed.... There were few opportunities for children to become aware of and develop an interest in topics or ideas through exploration or inquiry. Touching, experimenting, choosing, talking, and negotiating were primarily teacher-led and teacher-controlled functions.

Kentucky had a history of very traditional graded education before the passage of KERA. These teachers were volunteers who had chosen to implement reforms ahead of schedule, not stubborn change resistors. They had made significant changes in many aspects of instruction and classroom organization with hard work and considerable sacrifice of personal time. Relaxing direct control and allowing more responsibility to devolve to students may simply need to be a later step in the long journey away from gradedness.

## Conclusion

The skills and instructional methods mentioned in this chapter, as well as many others not presented here, are employed with one ultimate goal in mind: establishing a classroom culture that is academically and emotionally supportive of learning. In such an environment, it is safe to attempt challenging activities and risk making mistakes. There is time to learn at one's own rate and freedom to learn in one's own way. Each learner is given encouragement and individualized help in learning the skills he or she needs, rather than vague admonitions to do better, unflattering comparisons with faster learners, or threats of punishment.

A supportive learning environment is just as beneficial to adult educators as it is to children. Chapter 4 examines how insufficient support undermines attempts to implement nongraded practices, and how a supportive school culture can be established.

*Chapter 4*

# A Supportive School Culture

Administrators eager to promote nongraded practices can create a nightmarishly unsupportive atmosphere if they aren't aware of the level of support teachers need or if they lack the skills to provide adequate support. One teacher described the unhealthy atmosphere in her school as follows:

> Our administrators give us a talk and walk out to their car, saying "Oh, isn't this wonderful?" Meanwhile, back in the classroom teachers are wilting from stress. There's this closed feeling; everyone has this tight little world around them. They go into their classroom and close the door, and they're afraid to step out because somebody's going to say, "Here's something else to do."

Administrators must remember Fullan and Miles' assertion: "All change involves learning and all learning involves coming to understand and be good at something new. Thus conditions that support learning must be part and parcel of any change effort." If the school's culture does not support educators' learning, implementing nongraded education will be difficult or impossible.

Teachers support learning in their students by providing appropriate opportunities for them to learn knowledge and skills; by helping them see the progress they are making; by continually urging further improvement; and by providing encouragement, feedback, and suggestions (Ministry of Education 1992). Teachers and administrators implementing nongraded programs need these kinds of support just as much as their students.

## Why Is Support Important?

Implementing nongraded practices can be overwhelmingly stressful and frustrating, as staff members at Overland School discovered when they took the plunge. "With few models to follow and no opportunity to visit or

talk with other multiage teachers, staff members launched into their first year of instruction with little premonition of how difficult the transition would be," Miller reports. During the first few months, veterans felt as vulnerable and anxious as first-year teachers as they struggled to master the unfamiliar practices. In fact, Miller found veteran teachers seemed to experience more frustration. One teacher recalled days when he went home to his wife in tears, saying, "I don't know how to teach anymore. I don't know what I'm doing."

Teachers who already have experience with instructional components such as thematic teaching and cooperative learning before applying them in a mixed-age grouping should experience less stress than did this school's adventurers. But even under the best circumstances, it is difficult to abandon old methods that we employ with confidence for unfamiliar ones that may make us feel inept.

"Too often, in the face of change, there is a tendency to equate stress and anxiety with incompetence as educators," says Miller. Teachers need reassurance as much as, or more than, they need technical support to help them master the skills. A supportive principal assures teachers that their anxieties are normal, that their decreased competence is surely only temporary, and that no one will judge them to be inadequate before they have time to regain their equilibrium

Support can also help teachers cope with the heightened personal demands of nongraded teaching. Teachers are asked to model values and attitudes, such as curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, that cannot be put on like a pair of shoes in the morning. Creative problem-solving is required on a daily basis. Teachers who resort to "downshifting" under stress because of inadequate support will be incapable of meeting these demands.

## Support from Fellow Teachers

Research on educational change reveals that implementation success is strongly related to the amount of interaction and mutual assistance that occurs among a school's teachers (Fullan 1991). Such interaction can provide teachers with both technical and emotional support. Barbara Nelson Pavan (April 1992) asserts that "teacher collaboration is essential for the successful implementation of nongradedness."

Coteaching and team teaching are prominent examples of collaboration among small groups of teachers. However, teacher support and interaction should also be fostered among all teachers in a school.

**Advantages of Collaboration**

Shrage defines *collaboration* as "the process of *shared creation*: two or more individuals with complementary skills interacting to create a shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could have come to on their own" (cited in Fullan 1993). Psychological research has demonstrated that groups are more successful in creative problem-solving than individuals working alone (Elizabeth Cohen 1994). In meeting the fluid challenges of the nongraded classroom, two heads (or three, or five!) are indeed better than one.

Teachers lighten each other's loads when they combine their skills and perspectives through collaboration. Simply planning together can be helpful to teachers who teach singly. Being observed by and observing the teaching of colleagues enables teachers to share effective instructional techniques and give feedback and suggestions. In the area of assessment, pooling data and impressions enables teams to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of children's accomplishments and development. Materials and equipment can be shared more easily among teaming teachers, which is financially helpful to the school because fewer duplicates must be purchased (Anderson and Pavan).

Bringing together several teachers' skills and personal resources also benefits students. Westmoreland primary team members admire and respect one another's styles and talents: "We often talk about how different we are in our teaching styles. The kids get the benefit of all of us in teaming; we're all their teachers, and so they're the winners," said Terry Snyder.

Hunter notes that it is harder for isolated teachers to meet the needs of all their students. With teaming, children with strong specific needs can be placed with the team member who can best meet those needs. Contact with the other team members can gradually help such students adapt to and benefit from other teaching styles.

Many teachers say they feel revitalized by the continual professional interaction and feel sustained by the emotional support. This daily support is a tremendous advantage to teachers working to implement nongraded practices. "By taking care of each other. we can take care of the kids," said Westmoreland primary team member Carol Olson.

The British Columbia Ministry of Education is supporting a research-oriented form of teacher collaboration as part of primary-program reform. Teachers are granted release time to investigate the effectiveness of various Primary Program strategies, using classroom observation and other methods of inquiry. As the following comments testify, teacher-researchers note that the process not only provides reassuring evidence of the effectiveness of program strategies, but it is personally valuable as well:

"I have learned so much from this group and feel so supported . . . I really can't imagine teaching without something like it."

"A wonderful opportunity to reflect, read, discuss, and work with a committed group of teachers."

"Time in purposeful discussion with other educators is the single most effective way to implement change."

"There is no possible way, ever, I would have been able to develop as deep and meaningful an understanding . . . without being involved in this group." (Ministry of Education, Winter 1994)

## Disadvantages of Collaboration

Just as with children, simply putting groups of teachers together doesn't guarantee productive collaboration. Anderson and Pavan note that the skills required for successful collaboration were virtually absent from teacher-education literature until the late 1980s.

Fullan (1993) warns that collaboration can be sabotaged by the misconception that participants must always agree. Collaboration "does not mean consensus; it does not mean that major disagreements are verboten; it does not mean that the individual should go along with the crowd." Working through tensions and disagreements is a necessary part of the collaborative process, and differences are often the source of the best ideas. Successful groups focus on substantive issues and keep arguments depersonalized, but they still argue.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from false consensus lies the danger of *balkanization*: the formation of strong within-group loyalties that result in indifference or hostility to other groups or larger entities, such as the whole school or district (Fullan 1993). Another drawback of collaboration is it requires substantial amounts of time for planning, discussing, and evaluation. These cooperative endeavors "can't be accomplished over a cup of coffee between classes" (Grant and Johnson).

Finally, true collaboration is a deeply personal experience that cannot be created artificially on demand. Not every group of teachers has the right chemistry to work together. "Contrived collegiality" will simply consume scarce time without producing any results of value, says Fullan (1991).

## Requirements for Successful Teaming

Team members and coteachers need time to become comfortable with each other's style of teaching and build mutual trust. Having a mentor may be helpful, especially in the early stages of the relationship. "As one teacher commented, 'Co-teaching is like a marriage, and once in a while you need a

marriage counselor' " (Grant and Johnson). Teachers must be willing to learn new skills and to share skills, materials, territory, and recognition for achievement.

For some teachers, this type of sharing is psychologically difficult. Hunter relates the story of a teacher she supervised as principal of the UCLA laboratory school during its transition to nongraded education. A member of the first group to try team-teaching, this teacher proved unwilling or unable to share "the adulation that is extended to 'my teacher' by most students.... She, being an excellent teacher, had relished her reputation among students and parents as 'the best' teacher in the school." This teacher withdrew from the team the following year, and ultimately left the school.

### Not Everyone Will Be a Convert

Teacher behavior in schools in transition demonstrates the need for group support. Many schools exploring nongrading offer teachers and parents a choice between graded and nongraded classes, but few schools seem able to maintain both options indefinitely. Typically, nonconverts seem to feel increasingly uncomfortable as more and more of their colleagues observe the success of pioneering teachers, become enthusiastic about nongrading, and abandon graded practices.

The same pattern appears in case study after case study: eventually the holdouts retire or transfer to graded schools where they can find the psychological support of colleagues who share *their* educational values.

Principals should do their best to make all staff feel supported as they consider nongrading. Skillful change facilitation can certainly reduce friction and anxiety during the transition process. But realistically, principals should be prepared to lose some teachers.

### Support from the Larger School Community

Teachers need to feel supported by the whole school community, whether they are members of a team or not. Innovative efforts by individuals or small groups of teachers can threaten to split the school's teachers into "pro" and "con" subgroups. Avoiding destructive intraschool strife can resemble a delicate tightrope walk.

According to Fullan, it is erroneous to assume that involving some teachers in planning for change will increase acceptance of the change by all teachers. "As far as most teachers were concerned, when the change was produced by fellow teachers it was just as much *externally experienced* as if it had come from the university or the government" (Fullan 1991). Small groups of teachers can serve as pioneers, but information on nongrading must be transmitted to all teachers, and each must have the opportunity to assimilate it and make a personal decision about adoption. As one teacher put it, "I like change when it's personal, when I can make the change, and when I choose to make it" (Bruce Miller 1994).

At Boise-Eliot School in Portland, Oregon, teacher Robin Lindsley persuaded Principal Betty Campbell to allow her to initiate a mixed-age classroom years before other teachers in the school were ready to do so. According to multiage teacher and consultant Vicki Swartz, whom Campbell

later hired to provide ongoing staff development, initially some teachers who knew little about multiage practices felt threatened by Lindsley's class. They were concerned about being forced to follow her example, and about still being "considered good teachers in the eyes of the principal and people they care about in the building if they chose not to go mixed age" (Miller).

Multiage grouping isn't for every teacher, say Grant and Johnson. They strongly recommend making multiage grouping voluntary to build goodwill among all teachers in a school, including those who are not ready to try it themselves. Teachers who fear they may be forced to adopt nongraded practices may hope for the innovators to fail. "Like quicksand, colleagues' negative feelings can sap teachers' energy and leave them sinking in discouragement" (Grant and Johnson).

The challenging task of maintaining a sense of community and a mutually supportive atmosphere within the school is primarily the principal's responsibility.

## The Principal's Role in Creating a Supportive School Culture

The active support of the principal is indispensable to a successful nongraded program. And *active* is the key word. The prospects for success are poor if the principal arranges a workshop or two, exhorts teachers to change, and then retreats to his office. Creating a school culture that is supportive of teacher learning requires a substantial, ongoing, knowledgeable, skillful, well-directed investment of time and energy on the principal's part.

In many ways, the principal's role in the nongraded school parallels the teacher's role in the nongraded classroom. Here are several ways principals can support the faculty:

- provide teachers with appropriate learning experiences to acquire knowledge and skills by arranging professional development opportunities
- ensure that all teachers feel supported, wherever they are on the developmental spectrum of change, while still pushing for continual professional growth
- facilitate positive, cooperative interactions among team members and among the entire teaching staff
- monitor the progress of implementation
- give teachers praise, feedback, and suggestions on an ongoing basis
- be available to help when problems arise

The principal should neither order teachers to implement cookie-cutter versions of nongradedness handed down from on high, nor abandon responsible leadership in the name of giving teachers freedom to experiment. Fullan (1991) says, "School-wide discipline is to school improvement what classroom management is to teaching effectiveness." The principal must manage the budget, facilities, and other resources to create a stable framework within which teachers and teams can "construct their own learning" about nongradedness, experiment and explore, and ultimately create nongraded configurations that work for them and their students. At the same time, the principal must oversee and coordinate the efforts of different teachers or teams.

Like the teacher, the principal must strive to transform norms of isolation and autonomy into norms of mutual support, to create a climate of openness and trust in which risk-taking is encouraged, differences are respected, and mistakes are seen as a natural part of learning. Like the teacher, the principal can influence norms by modeling the desired attitudes and behavior.

Fulfilling this role requires sophisticated leadership and interpersonal skills, as well as personal characteristics such as patience, empathy, and the ability to share power. "Principals have to rise above the fear of losing control, and they have to hone new skills: initiating actions firmly without being seen as 'controlling,' supporting others without taking over for them," state Fullan and Miles.

Like teachers, most administrators have not received formal training in many of these skills. Anderson and Pavan note that the interpersonal skills needed for working in groups and for helping others work in groups have typically been underemphasized or absent from supervisory training. Fullan (1991) says administrators are largely unprepared to act as change facilitators. Most principals who possess these skills have learned them from experience.

"All these stances and skills are learnable, but they take time," say Fullan and Miles. Like teachers, principals need opportunities for professional development and for interaction with colleagues who are facing similar challenges. Principals need support from the district and beyond as they learn about nongraded education and develop the skills they need to facilitate change.

*Chapter 5*

# Support from the District and Beyond

Establishing a successful nongraded program requires an enormous investment of time and effort by a school's staff. The task is rendered infinitely easier when support is forthcoming from the district, state, and national levels. Moreover, without support from beyond the school, hard-won programs are unlikely to be maintained over the long term. A flourishing program can be destroyed by the departure of a few key teachers or administrators, as many nongraded proponents of the sixties and early seventies discovered.

"Schools can become hotbeds of innovation and reform in the absence of external support, but they cannot stay innovative without the continuing support of the district and other agencies," warn Fullan and Miles. Personnel at the district and state levels can support site staff by providing leadership, technical assistance, and financial support, and by removing regulatory barriers.

## District Support for Learning

The challenge for district leaders is to strike a balance between controlling schools with bureaucratic regulations and leaving schools to operate in isolation. Districts should involve school staff in setting districtwide goals, establish expectations for improvement, monitor school effectiveness, and provide feedback and suggestions to principals. Districts should provide coordinated support, while empowering principals and staff to develop improvement plans suited to their schools' unique circumstances (Fullan 1991). Once again, parallels can be seen among the ideal district-school, principal-teacher, and teacher-student relationships.

The Corvallis (Oregon) School District has taken this approach. In the late 1980s, it appointed a committee of parents, teachers, and administrators to review elementary school practices. The school board accepted the committee's 1988 recommendation and required all district schools to adopt developmentally appropriate practices, but allowed schools great flexibility in how they chose to implement them. The district's elementary principals developed general parameters within which to operate, and the district arranged workshops with outside experts for district staff and created a monitoring committee to oversee the progress of the ten elementary schools (Joan Gaustad, April 1992).

In a study of eight school districts, Rozenholtz (cited in Fullan 1991) found that superintendents of "stuck" districts blamed principals for their schools' poor performance but offered them little help, communicating norms of self-reliance and isolation that discouraged principals from seeking assistance. Superintendents in improving districts "constantly availed themselves of opportunities to learn about new ideas and practices," and expected principals to be "continuous learners" and to create conditions that facilitated teacher learning. "Stuck" districts tended to ignore ineffective teachers, while improving districts "helped teachers improve through specific supportive practices" and considered firing as a last resort. "Learning—in this case of adults—must permeate everything the district and school does; it must be held as equally important for all staff regardless of position," Fullan (1991) concludes.

## State and Provincial Support

The language and expectations of graded education have become deeply embedded in our culture during the past century and a half. Individual schools and districts are fighting great societal momentum when they attempt to implement nongraded practices. The likelihood of indepth, long-term change is greatly increased if "top-down" governmental support stimulates and reinforces "bottom-up" change efforts at the local level.

State and provincial support of nongraded implementation can resemble district-level support, but on a larger scale. Governments can set broad goals, with the participation of educators; create support among the general public by publicizing those goals; provide incentives and financial and technical assistance; monitor progress; accept differences in readiness to change among districts, schools, and individuals; and empower local educators to decide how best to work toward those goals. Education agencies in Oregon, Kentucky, and British Columbia have followed variations of this pattern, while negotiating the inevitable political and economic bumps and potholes that dot the road to implementation.

British Columbia's Ministry of Education has given high priority to facilitating interaction and collaboration among educators. Examples of these actions include providing special "teacher interaction" funding to districts and encouraging district collaboration with faculty members at universities and community colleges. The Ministry has explicitly compared the interactions of adults in implementing the Primary Program to those among students in nongraded classrooms (Ministry of Education, Winter 1994).

The Oregon Department of Education has facilitated interaction among educators by disseminating information to enable networking among teachers and districts. Due to lack of funding, the state has only been able to provide financial support to a handful of model programs. The State Board of Education is also willing to waive any state requirements that impede innovation, said McClanahan. This, too, is a valuable way of demonstrating support.

Kentucky has provided much excellent informational, financial, and technical support to teachers and districts. It also expects variation among programs in different schools, and even within the same building. However, the state has been criticized on several counts: the complexity and number of changes it has mandated; the fact that the changes are mandated rather than encouraged; and, above all, the short timeframe for implementation. For many teachers, these factors have created an atmosphere more supportive of panic than of personal growth and learning. These concerns are discussed in chapter 6.

## A Chain of Support

Ideally, a continuous chain of support for nongraded education and developmental educational change should link governments to school districts, district administrators and school boards to principals, principals to teachers, and teachers to students. Just as grade-level distinctions are blurred in mixed-age classrooms, divisions in the educational hierarchy should be deemphasized in favor of a collaborative model in which students, teachers, and administrators are seen as "continuous learners among a community of other learners" (Miller), supporting each other as they work toward common goals in highly individual ways.

Unfortunately, many real-world problems, such as insufficient time and money, interfere with the fulfillment of this idealistic vision. These major impediments to the development of a supportive school culture are the focus of chapter 6.

*Chapter 6*

# Sufficient Time and Money

Surmounting the obstacles to nongraded education described in previous chapters depends, inescapably, on sufficient time and money. Without enough of these essential elements, the good intentions and enthusiasm of educators or the mandates of policy-makers from afar can worsen the existing situation, creating teacher burnout and replacing a problematic graded system with half-baked, pseudo-nongraded chaos.

This chapter discusses the role of time and money in creating and maintaining quality nongraded education. It also examines how these factors have affected implementation efforts in British Columbia, Kentucky, and Oregon.

## American Schools Are Time-Starved

"Schools have been time-starved for years. We don't have time to teach and kids don't have time to learn," Jim Grant tells educators at workshops across the nation. And rarely does he find disagreement from teachers. Decade after decade, as society has changed, teachers have seen demands on their time increase. Nonacademic activities such as personal safety and antigang education have been added to the school day, and more students bring increasingly severe problems to school—problems that disrupt other students' learning time and consume precious teacher time. Carol Olson calculates that last year fifteen of her twenty-five six- to eight-year-olds were classified as at risk, for reasons ranging from inability to speak English to attention deficit disorder to multiple sexual molestation. "This is the type of situation all teachers are facing now, regardless of what kind of grouping you use," she said.

Unfortunately, schools are organized "as though none of this has happened," observes the National Education Commission on Time and Learning (1994).

> We agree with the Maine mathematics teacher who said, "The problem with our schools is not that they are *not* what they used to be, but that they *are* what they used to be." In terms of time, our schools are unchanged despite a transformation in the world around them.

The commission calls for massive changes in American education, with time recognized as the crucial element. "Both learners and teachers need more time—not to do more of the same, but to use all time in new, different, and better ways. The key to liberating learning lies in unlocking time."

## Implementation Takes Time, Time, Time

Allowing sufficient time for implementation simply cannot be overemphasized. "Every analysis of the problems of change efforts that we have seen in the last decade of research and practice has concluded that time is the salient issue," state Fullan and Miles.

It takes time for teachers and administrators to learn and assimilate the knowledge that supports nongrading. It takes time and ongoing technical support to master new instructional and change-facilitation skills. Educators need time to reflect, find meaning, and integrate old and new understandings; time to learn and practice collaboration. According to Fullan (1991), implementing a significant single innovation should be expected to take at least two or three years; institutional reforms, five years or more. Individual districts, schools, and educators may require more time to reach such goals, depending on their starting points and access to expertise and financial support.

Educators who have "been there" consistently emphasize the relationship between time and success. "What transpired here was four years in the making before we mixed classes," said Principal Dan Hays of Lincoln School's mixed-age program (Miller). "We phased in the curriculum changes for six or seven years before changing class configurations," reports another Oregon educator (Oregon Department of Education and Ackerman Laboratory School). One British Columbia educator thinks a lifetime is too short, "The first generation becomes familiar with the terms; the second generation understands and applies them" (Ministry of Education 1994a). "Go slowly," "Don't bite off too much too soon," "Do not rush the planning process," "Take your time," "Move slowly," "Don't rush," and "Slow!" advise Oregon educators who have implemented mixed-age grouping (Oregon Department of Education and Ackerman Laboratory School).

The National Education Commission on Time and Learning expresses this more eloquently:

> Teachers, principals and administrators need *time* for reform. They

need *time* to come up to speed as academic standards are overhauled, *time* to come to grips with new assessment systems, and *time* to make productive and effective use of greater professional autonomy.... Adding school reform to the list of things schools must accomplish, without recognizing that time in the current calendar is a limited resource, trivializes the effort. It sends a powerful message to teachers: don't take this reform business too seriously. Squeeze it in on your own time.

## Maintaining Quality Education Takes Time

Even after the extra demands of implementation have subsided, maintaining quality nongraded instructional methods requires more time than maintaining graded education, particularly for planning, collaborating, and assessment. If this time is not provided as part of the regular school schedule, innovations will gradually fall out of use.

Educators in one Oregon multiage program determined that to successfully operate a mixed-age program, ongoing time must be provided for five

### Give Teachers the Time They Need

**We Recommend That Teachers Be Provided with the Professional Time and Opportunities They Need to Do Their Jobs.**

The daily working life of most teachers is one of unrelieved time pressure and isolation; they work, largely alone, in a classroom of 25-30 children or adolescents for hours every day. Unlike teachers in many systems overseas, who can take advantage of continuous, daily opportunities for professional development, American teachers have little time for preparation, planning, cooperation, or professional growth.

The Commission believes that time for planning and professional development is urgently needed—not as a frill or an add-on, but as a major aspect of the agreement between teachers and districts.

The whole question of teachers and time needs to be rethought in a serious and systematic way. The issue is not simply teachers. It is not just time. The real issue is educational quality. Teachers need time to develop effective lessons. They need time to assess students in meaningful ways and discuss the results with students individually. They need time to talk to students, and listen to them, and to confer with parents and other family members. They need time to read professional journals, interact with their colleagues, and watch outstanding teachers demonstrate new strategies.

Districts can provide this time in several ways: extending the contract year to pay teachers for professional development, using the longer day for the same purpose, or providing for the widespread and systematic use of a cadre of well-prepared, full-time, substitute teachers.

The last thing districts should encourage is sending children home to provide time for "teacher professional days." We will never have truly effective schools while teachers' needs are met at the expense of students' learning time.

*Source:* National Education Commission on Time and Learning (1994)

essential out-of-class activities: (1) daily preparation, (2) weekly team planning, (3) monthly inservice information, (4) periodic staff development (inservices, classes, and workshops), and (5) at least one day per month for curriculum development (Oregon Department of Education and Ackerman Laboratory School). Unfortunately, a schedule including this much planning time sounds like a utopian fantasy to most teachers. McClanahan hears this complaint frequently as she travels around Oregon:

> Teachers tell me they don't have enough time—time to think, to talk to each other, and to plan instructional strategies. That is the single most critical issue that I hear mentioned all the time. I believe that most of our teachers are excellent teachers, that they know wonderful strategies for instruction. But sometimes they're dealing with so many other issues that they get in what I call "the survival rut."

Owens, a private school teacher, struggles to keep from falling into that rut. She enjoys cooperative learning and feels it has worked very successfully with her students. She has begun using portfolios and student-led parent conferences, and she is interested in implementing other innovative strategies. Her school provided a week of excellent staff development before the start of the 1994-95 school year. But lack of ongoing planning time makes it difficult for her to introduce and maintain new methods.

> One year we had a music program, and they went to music for half an hour at a time twice a week, so that I had a little bit of planning time. But normally I have no break all day long from my class. So you either choose to stay at school until six or so every night, and come in on Sundays, or you try to have a normal life somehow, knowing that you're not doing your best job. You really get burned out after a while.
>
> There gets to be so much to do, that I end up falling back into my old patterns. What I'm afraid of is that we're going to wake up ten years from now and find out that we are living today, because we won't have *made* any changes.

America's international economic competitors do not share the American conviction that time in front of the class is "the only valid use of teachers' time" (National Education Commission on Time and Learning). In Japan and China, teachers spend only three to four hours in the classroom out of nine or more hours at school each day. The rest of the time is spent at their desks in the "teachers' room" grading papers, preparing lessons, and talking with colleagues, or attending meetings focused on improving teaching techniques (Fullan 1993). In Germany, teachers spend only twenty-one to twenty-four hours in front of the class out of a thirty-eight-hour work week (Commission on Time and Learning). Teachers in Australia and New Zealand have daily opportunities to discuss teaching and learning during

their morning tea break (Deborah Sumner 1994).

If American students are to match the achievement of their counterparts overseas, American adults will have to change some of their attitudes toward education. Perhaps the obsessive American preoccupation with competition and comparison can be used to justify providing more time to American teachers.

## Time Is Expensive—and Worth the Expense

In educational change, time often translates into money: money to pay for staff development workshops and ongoing technical support, money for release time to enable teachers to attend those workshops and to discuss and plan changes with their colleagues. Money is also needed to purchase developmentally appropriate instructional materials and furniture for classrooms, and resources such as books and videotapes for adult learners.

Louis and Miles found that major change in metropolitan high schools cost between $50,000 and $100,000 annually (cited in Fullan and Miles). Some of these schools spent five times as much as others with little effect; money spent on expensive equipment and new jobs was less effective than money spend on "local capacity-building" such as staff development. "Nevertheless, some minimum level of funding is always needed," note Fullan and Miles. A RAND study found that teachers needed up to fifty days of instruction, practice, and coaching to become comfortable with new teaching strategies (Commission on Time and Learning).

Providing teachers with ongoing paid time for planning, assessment, and professional interaction is also costly, but it is necessary if educational improvements are to be maintained. "If we value learning, the cost of 'doing it right the first time' is less than the expense involved in 'doing it wrong' and having to do it over again. As the American business community now understands full well, in the end quality costs less" (Commission on Time and Learning).

For an example of an attempt to "do education reform right the first time," we can look to the Canadian province of British Columbia.

## British Columbia: More Time and Money Always Help

British Columbia's Pacific Rim location and its active shipping trade have given the province a fluid, cosmopolitan nature and a sensitivity to international economic trends. In the 1980s, economic concerns and the province's increasing diversity contributed to public pressure for educational change. A decade of provincewide information-gathering, debate and discus-

sion, research, hearings, and official reports culminated in the comprehensive Year 2000 education-reform package, the centerpiece of which was the Primary Program (Philip Gammage 1992; Gaustad, April 1992; Ministry of Education 1994). "The speed of consultation and change has been impressive; the documentation available has been considerable; the impact on schools immediate," says Gammage, comparing the province's change in policy to a great ocean liner changing course.

The extent to which various states have borrowed from the trailblazing program also testifies to its worth. Ministry of Education staff shared advice, information, and documents with Kentucky as that state was developing its own primary program (Gaustad, April 1992). Many Pacific Northwest educators have made the trek north to observe the program in action in British Columbia classrooms. With the province's permission and assistance, the education departments of Iowa and Nebraska recently coproduced an updated version of Primary Program documents under the title *The Primary Program: Growing and Learning in the Heartland.* Alaska has also made extensive use of Primary Program materials, said Mary Nall, elementary coordinator at the Ministry of Education. United States taxpayers are fortunate that British Columbia has been so generous.

### A Carefully Planned Process of Evolution

By comparison with most educational change efforts, the Primary Program reform is truly a thing of beauty. At every stage, input has been solicited from parents, educators, and other stakeholders; collaboration and exchange of information has been encouraged among individuals and institutions; and financial, technical, and emotional support have been provided. The carefully planned reform process incorporates systematic evaluation and provides for change and adjustment as each year of implementation "carries the Primary Program further from its initial circumstances into the new educational world it has helped create" (Ministry of Education 1994).

The plan's timeframe realistically reflects the enormity and complexity of the changes envisioned. The Ministry encourages long-term change by providing teachers with information and support and encouraging them to incorporate new elements into their teaching as they feel ready to do so. A two-year developmental process of orientation and optional implementation preceded the first year of formal implementation (1991-92). Full implementation is expected to take at least a decade, but no "deadlines" have been set. Rather, it is hoped that implementation "will turn into a continuing evolution of educational practice" (Ministry of Education 1994).

## More Time and Money, Please!

Survey responses from educators reveal that 98 percent support the goals of the Primary Program, express satisfaction with most elements of it in operation, and perceive that implementation is well under way. However, most respondents also insist that ongoing success depends on continuing government support. One educator called for more money for books and resource materials: "The Primary Program is wonderful, but becoming impossible without proper funding to be used directly in the classroom." "We need more *time* for inservice, report-card writing, parent conferencing," said another. Another pleaded, "Funding has to continue!! (increase!) We need to get back our Primary facilitator. We need to get back Primary networking afternoons. We may be off and rolling but the strings are not ready to be cut" (Ministry of Education 1994).

Expense has sometimes impeded the Ministry's ability to communicate important information to educators. Hefty documents and multimedia items have often been produced in small production runs and quickly snapped up by individuals with personal Ministry contacts. Teachers have sometimes had the awkward experience of seeing a new document for the first time "in the hands of a well-informed parent with some questions to ask." The Ministry notes that "a system developed to 'distribute' a relatively thin stream of mandatory materials may have to give way to a newer system developed to 'market' quantities of optional materials among educators and parents" (Ministry of Education 1994).

Communicating the program's nature and rationale to parents and the general public is another area often mentioned by educators as problematic. Correcting misunderstandings and negative impressions and building more support will require—what else?—additional time and money.

## Political Pressure Affects the Primary Program

Fullan and Miles note that "political time lines are at variance with the time lines for education reform. This difference often results in vague goals, unrealistic schedules, a preoccupation with the symbols of reform . . . and shifting priorities as political pressures ebb and flow." While the Primary Program has clear goals and a realistic schedule, and focuses on substance as well as philosophy, it has not been immune to political pressures.

In a 1988 overview of educational trends in Western Canada, Gammage observed that "skirmishing" had occurred in three main domains: between early childhood staff and senior administrators, who have typically had little experience or inservice regarding early childhood education; between certain politicians and teacher unions; and between vocal "back to basics" minorities and developmentally oriented educators, particularly

concerning phonics versus the whole-language approach. Gammage concluded that British Columbia, like Alberta, was emerging from a long content-focused, back-to-basics period and entering a period in which the process of acquiring knowledge receives greater emphasis.

Since Gammage's article appeared, however, a political backlash from back-to-basics proponents has influenced the current provincial government and the Primary Program. A 1993 policy update cites complaints from some parents and other citizens that changes since 1988 were introduced too rapidly. Repeatedly mentioning the need for "strong basic skills" and "high standards," the policy update announces that K-3 graded designations will be reintroduced, and that from grades 4-7 "all teachers and schools will be required to use letter grades to evaluate student progress." Standards for achievement at all levels are currently being reviewed (Art Charbonneau 1993).

Overall, however, it appears the direction of the Primary Program will be relatively unaffected by these adjustments to education policy. The document states, "Parents and teachers have told us they don't want to throw out the successful changes that have made children's learning more interesting and relevant. We will build upon and strengthen these achievements."

## Kentucky: Deadline Pressure Squeezes Teachers

In 1985, the Kentucky Supreme Court declared the state's educational system unconstitutional because of inequities among districts in funding and in educational quality. The 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) was designed to eliminate corrupt practices along with these inequities, and to transform the largely traditional system into one capable of equipping Kentucky students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in the twenty-first-century American economy.

Prior to KERA, teacher pay and per-student spending in Kentucky were far below the national average. Dropout rates and adult-illiteracy rates were high (Steffy). Some teachers in the state used innovative practices such as cooperative learning and learning stations, but many "taught with their teacher's manual in front of them, reading word for word from the manual and having the children sit in rows without saying a word unless they were spoken to," said former third-grade teacher Kay Ann Wilborn.

Educational quality also suffered from nepotism and other corrupt practices. School districts are the largest employers in many Kentucky counties with high unemployment, and, prior to KERA, school boards controlled hiring decisions. Board elections were often dominated by concerns over money, jobs, and clout rather than concern for children's educational needs. Administrators often lacked "even rudimentary technical skills"

(Steffy); political connections and loyalty to the status quo, not competence, often won them their positions.

Teachers and administrators accustomed to functioning in this environment were poorly prepared for the changes that lay ahead.

### A Top-Down Effort to Support and Empower Educators

Shirley Hord and her colleagues (1987) assert that top-down change efforts can be successful if sufficient support and assistance are provided to participants. KERA's top-down planners sought to support educators and empower them to design programs appropriate to local needs while mandating clear overall goals. The process was planned to encourage change with incentives, reward schools for improvement, and push resistant districts by establishing deadlines for steps toward progress and sanctions for lack of improvement.

The Kentucky Department of Education attempted to involve educators as active participants and encourage ownership of the change. Extensive professional development was mandated and funded for both teachers and administrators. Primary Program planners consulted practitioner advisory groups during the early stages of program design and made modifications based on their input (Steffy). KERA also mandated the formation of school councils, to be composed of parents and teachers as well as administrators, and gave councils decision-making authority that had previously rested with the district.

The plan acknowledged developmental differences among educators and emphasized that all deserved support, wherever they were on the "continuum of change" (Gaustad, April 1992). A Kentucky Department of Education publication emphasized that successful professional development encourages "flexibility, experimentation, and risk taking, rather than prescribing lockstep behaviors or punishing failures"; includes "realistic time estimates for changes in practice"; and allows participants "sufficient time to learn, plan for, and try out new skills" (Steffy).

Change was projected to occur in three stages. During the 1990-91 school year, *exploration* would build awareness and understanding. In 1991-92, *orientation* would focus on preparing for change. *Implementation* was to start no later than 1992-93 and could last two or three years, depending on circumstances in the school. By spring 1992, each school was required to submit an action plan describing how full implementation would be achieved by the fall 1995 deadline.

Kentucky schools buzzed with excitement and confusion as the process got under way. Teachers anxious to obtain information and training were frustrated by delays and difficulties in obtaining them. The Kentucky

Department of Education offered technical assistance ranging from publications and grants to regional workshops and statewide institutes, but it could not fill the professional development needs of all the state's educators. "Districts were bombarded by consultants claiming to have expertise. Since districts were free to choose whomever they wanted to deliver the required inservice, there was very little quality control," Steffy states. The Kentucky Education Association also developed training programs to help fill some of these needs.

Problems in timing and coordination also fed anxiety. Deadlines for implementation and sanctions for failure were set long before clear information became available concerning criteria for success. Redrafting of state curriculum frameworks was not scheduled to be completed until July 1993 (Wallace G. Wilkinson 1990).

Despite imperfections in the plan, teachers in many schools plunged enthusiastically into implementation and began making substantial progress. Unfortunately, not all educators took the schedule seriously, and some districts did nothing to prepare for the change. As Wilborn explained, "In the past, the state superintendent of public instruction was elected every four years and could not be re-elected. When the old superintendent left, the new one would bring in new programs and the old ones would go out." This pattern had fostered an expectation that innovations are likely to be short-lived and can be waited out.

According to Steffy, many people expected the reform to be significantly altered during the 1992 session of the Kentucky General Assembly. But the legislature did not dilute the reform. Instead, key legislators questioned the gradual implementation design. Senate Bill 420 was passed, which moved up the deadline for full implementation to fall 1993 (Steffy; Kentucky Department of Education, Spring 1992). Suddenly, the most poorly prepared districts faced a mandate to implement developmentally appropriate practices, continuous progress, mixed-age grouping involving five- through eight-year-olds, authentic assessment, and team teaching *in a single year.*

### Shortened Timeframe Angers and Frustrates Teachers

The shortened deadline placed tremendous pressure on already-stressed teachers. "All studies reported that teachers were overwhelmed with the reform and needed more time for planning, preparation, and refining their progress," reported the Kentucky Institute for Education Research (1993). Teachers said they needed more daily and weekly planning time, as well as a longer period for implementation.

In spring 1992, James Raths and his colleagues (1992) visited twelve schools that had begun implementation ahead of schedule. They reported that tremendous progress had been made in these schools due to educators'

dedication, enthusiasm, and personal sacrifice.

> In all schools on our itinerary, we saw teachers working together in teams—often at great cost. They gave up planning periods to meet together, or stayed late, not infrequently through the dinner hour. Efforts on their part to give more time—in the evening and on weekends and during the summer—for no salary led to sometimes bitter confrontations with husbands who thought they should worry as much about their own children at home as they worry about their children at school.

Despite their achievements, these schools were still far from full implementation of the mandated changes. Teachers and administrators insisted the new deadline was unrealistic. "Teachers feel aggrieved and mistreated by the new and accelerated time line, especially those who charted out a plan that accommodated the earlier schedule and which was aborted by the abrupt change," the observers reported (Raths and others).

Raths and his colleagues strongly recommended that the deadline be moved back. They pointed out that all the schools they visited had special advantages of some sort—supportive principals, extra resources, particularly enthusiastic teachers, and/or strong community support—as well as a "head start" on implementation.

> The teachers in these fortunate schools had trouble imagining how their colleagues in sister schools, who have done nothing to get ready for multi-age grouping or the other attributes mandated by KERA, could possibly meet the deadline.... [T]o require all teachers in all schools to implement the program on such short notice, without ample training or direction is, in the minds of many teachers, an invitation to failure. According to those with whom we spoke, there are many frightened, angry, and pessimistic teachers watching from the sidelines.

## Insufficient Funding Impedes Progress

Teachers told Raths and his colleagues they didn't have enough funds to purchase instructional materials such as hands-on mathematics and science materials and trade books for whole-language instruction. Teachers also reported a critical need for more "adult hands" to help with the additional "library work, duplication of materials, preparation of visuals, grading of papers, and much more" required in multiage classes.

A year later, James Raths and John Fanning (1993) found that despite increased funding for classroom purchases, many teachers continued to spend substantial amounts of their own money to purchase equipment and supplies. Some districts had provided paid aides or arranged for volunteers to help teachers, but teachers still wanted more help. Lack of funds has also

prevented KDE from printing sufficient quantities of important publications, such as *Primary Thoughts: Implementing Kentucky's Primary Program.* Renee Aniton described this publication, which she uses in her Kentucky Education Association primary workshops, as an excellent—but unavailable—resource for teachers. "Every time I take my booklet to a training, the teachers ask, 'What is that? Where did you get it and how can I get it?' The last time I checked with the department, they had run out of funds to do a reprint," she explained.

Raths and Fanning recommend that districts and the state make every effort to provide teachers with additional supplies and materials; computers to facilitate clerical aspects of their new duties, such as writing narrative reports; and, above all, more time.

> Perhaps the most expensive thing a superintendent can do is to employ one more teacher in every school. Yet, if KERA is to succeed, ways will have to be found to schedule teachers' time or use paraprofessional personnel to free teachers to do the work that is so vital to its success. *It is immoral and unethical to expect teachers to give their time away—weekends, late evenings, and even summers—when they are off the payroll.* As one teacher told us, "I am committed to KERA, but also dearly want to stay a married woman, and if I give any more time to my teaching, my husband will leave me." (Emphasis added)

### The Elementary Schools Assistance Plan

The July 1994 passage of the Elementary Schools Assistance Plan (House Joint Resolution 62) promises to give educators more resources—but no more time—to implement KERA. The plan will provide resources such as funding for up to nine days of additional staff development, production of videotapes and documents explaining assessment strategies that can ease teacher workload, the development of thematic curriculum materials and training in their use, collection and dissemination of information on effective parent communication, and leadership training for principals (Thomas C. Boysen 1994).

According to Aniton, the Kentucky Education Association influenced passage of Resolution 62 by encouraging teachers to inform their legislators of their need for more training and assistance.

## Oregon: Tax Cuts Bleed Resources from Nongraded Programs

As chapter 2 noted, the 1991 Oregon Educational Act for the 21st

Century mandated no changes at the primary level. Oregon educators face no deadlines, and, in general, those voluntarily implementing nongraded primary instruction receive no financial support, with the exception of the ten schools that received grants to develop pilot programs.

An unrelated legislative event has made a major financial impact on Oregon educators, whether involved in nongrading or not. Ballot Measure 5, passed seven months before House Bill 3565, limited local property taxes and ordered the state to replace the local funds lost to schools. But the state is also under pressure to equalize funding between historically rich and poor districts. As a result, while formerly underfunded districts have seen substantial post-Measure 5 increases in per-student spending, formerly well-funded districts have experienced devastating cuts that have deepened each year as the property tax limits are phased in (Bill Graves 1994).

Ironically, in some cases funding cuts have encouraged nongraded practices. A number of Oregon schools mention money as one factor in their decisions to adopt mixed-age grouping. For example, one school reported that its "original reason for implementing a mixed-age program was that it served as a better way for children to learn. However, with recent financial cuts, [the school] has discovered it is the only way to equalize class loads" (Oregon Department of Education and Ackerman Laboratory School). One can only hope teachers in these financially strapped schools will be given adequate time and emotional support as they make the change.

Meanwhile, nongraded programs begun before the cuts are struggling to stay afloat as resources diminish. Educators involved in the ten pilot programs expressed concern about securing sufficient financial resources to achieve full implementation or to maintain what they have already achieved (Oregon Department of Education, December 1993). Two of these programs are located in Eugene's Westmoreland Elementary and Corvallis' Lincoln Elementary, both in formerly well-funded districts.

**Westmoreland Teachers Dance Faster**

The Eugene school district is feeling the post-Measure 5 equalization crunch. The district's public affairs office reported that 350 positions have been cut since 1989—18 percent of the district's personnel, including 31 percent of its central administrative staff. Enrollment has risen by approximately 1,200 during the same time period.

The cutbacks have complicated implementation at Westmoreland. In addition to adjusting and refining new program elements, the primary team has had to redesign the program each time resources are cut. "This is still a learning process for us," explained primary teacher Carol Olson. "Just as we learn something, we come back the next year and hear 'Oh, by the way, you

don't have this; you'll have to learn how to do it all over again'."

Before implementation, Westmoreland students' math and reading scores compared favorably with the scores of students in schools with much higher average socioeconomic status. The team wanted to maintain success in these areas while offering students the social benefits of mixed-age grouping.

*1992-93.* During the team's first year of full-time multiage grouping, they grouped students heterogeneously for homeroom, art, science, and social studies, and homogeneously by functional level for reading and math. Daily music and physical-education classes enabled the teachers to work with small groups in a "back-to-back" schedule. Olson explained, "We sent half our kids out for a fifty-minute block: twenty-five minutes of music and twenty-five minutes of PE. The other half stayed in the room for small-group reading. Then after fifty minutes, we'd switch."

This arrangement permitted "finely tuned placement" in reading and math, but it had drawbacks. "I might see a child in my homeroom for fifteen minutes, send them to another teacher for reading, back to that teacher for the language block, to another teacher for math, then get them back in my homeroom at the end of the day. Each of us wound up working with 75 or 80 children," said Olson. Teachers were concerned about the number of transitions some children had to make.

*1993-94.* During the second year, the team decided to keep their homeroom groups for math to increase continuity. Learning to teach math to students of mixed abilities was a major challenge for most teachers. They still regrouped for reading, but cutbacks eliminated Westmoreland's librarian and reduced music and physical education to half time. "We had music two days a week and PE three days a week for half the year, then we had music three days a week and PE twice a week. I would send all my kids to music or PE, whichever day it was," Olson explained. This made the back-to-back reading schedule impossible.

The teachers went to a "staggered start" to preserve small-group reading instruction. Instead of all students arriving at 8:15 a.m. and departing at 2:15 p.m., half came early and had reading from 8:05 to 8:45, when the remaining students arrived. The early arrivals left at 1:55, and the others had reading instruction until 2:35. The teachers extended their teaching day and shortened their lunch period from 45 to 35 minutes to accommodate this. They used the midday break provided by music and physical education for planning time—for the same pay, of course. Meanwhile, lost aide time had increased teacher workload.

*1994-95.* The cuts phased in this year totally eliminated music. The primary team plans to retain the "staggered start" schedule and cut their lunch break to thirty minutes. "That's about enough time to get the kids

down, tear into a sandwich and go to the bathroom," Olson observed wryly. As physical education only provides a twenty-five-minute break every other day, teachers are trying to find "creative ways" to give each other planning time.

"For example, twenty minutes prior to lunch, I might take Pat Bauer's kids and do an activity with the whole group. Then after lunch she would take her group and my group for twenty minutes. That would give each of us a fifty-minute lunch and planning period," Olson explained.

Even deeper cuts are expected in 1995-96. The school may lose its library aide and counselor, and class size may increase. Olson predicts class size may ultimately rise as high as thirty-five.

*A Difficult Dance.* Team member Terry Snyder compares teaching to a dance. "There are degrees of difficulty in everything. Take a simple box step, that's one degree of difficulty. When you put a turn into it, that's a second factor. And when you change it to a waltz rhythm, that's another factor." Each round of budget cuts makes the dance more difficult.

> Every child, as class size goes up, is another set of parents, another IEP (individualized education plan) meeting, another thing to talk about with the teachers who share the child. And you have to prepare the cumulative folders because there's no longer an aide to do it. It's not just a report card anymore; you have to pull the papers, provide time for the children to go through them and conference with each one individually, then get them into the correct order and date them, in each subject area.
>
> And then music is cut. Well, that was 20 minutes you got to work on some of these things. No music teacher means *you* had better start providing some music. There's no counseling time; there's not a librarian; there's nobody in the computer lab. So you do *all* of those things. And each thing adds on another turn, another twirl, another rhythm. And you're doing it with more children.

Mixed-age grouping did help in equalizing class sizes; formerly three first-grade classes fed into two second-grade classes, which sometimes overburdened the second-grade teachers. But the teachers have not enjoyed the continuity theoretically provided by teaching the same children for three years. The area served by the school includes University of Oregon married-student housing and low-income apartments with a highly transitory population. Many children move away when their parents graduate or find new jobs. Last year, only three of Olson's students had been with her for two years.

"I would *really* like to have the opportunity to compare mixed-age to straight grade without the cut of resources," she said with a sigh. "There's a portion of me that would like to go back to straight grade, because that would

be one less thing to deal with. I'm not sure that would be the best thing to do, but, you know, how far can you stretch a rubber band before it breaks?"

### Lincoln School Juggles Staff

Like Eugene, the Corvallis School District had been forced to cut its staff by 18 percent during the last five years. Eighty-seven teaching positions, twenty-five administrators, and twenty-eight other staff were lost as enrollment rose by five hundred students (Bill Graves 1994). "Corvallis has been hit very, very hard," said Lincoln Principal Dan Hays. "Our curriculum development department, in particular, has been virtually gutted. That area is a ghost town; there are only two or three people where there used to be sixty or seventy." This department had worked since the mideighties to replace traditional grade-linked curriculum with curriculum that matches new knowledge about learning, laying vital groundwork for developmentally appropriate practices (Gaustad, April 1992).

Lincoln serves a population with many families of low socioeconomic status, and a high proportion of the school's students have social or behavior problems. One main reason for its move to nongradedness was the desire to create a sense of community in which students would feel connected and emotionally secure, thus better able to learn (Miller). During the first two years of implementation, from 1989 to 1991, class size averaged in the low twenties, and physical education, music, art, and counseling were offered at comfortable levels.

*1991-92.* Lincoln handled the first round of cuts by reducing physical education, music, art, and learning-center staff time by 10 percent and making some other minor adjustments. "Some people weren't there on Friday afternoons. It was a bit disruptive," said Hays. But in general, staff felt they had negotiated the first year of cutbacks fairly well.

*1992-93.* Lincoln staff unanimously voted to eliminate four classroom-teacher positions to preserve the performing arts program and other specialist positions (Miller). Average class size rose to about twenty-seven. At first this didn't seem to cause significant problems. Meanwhile, the cumulative effect of the reduced auxiliary staff time was beginning to be felt, said Hays.

> Kids couldn't totally rely on a person being there, and different people were important to different kids. We realized that we had to have all our adults there full-time, so that the kids could trust their presence and availability. That's an issue they face in their lives; they've got parents bopping out on them all the time. So if you do that to them in school, right away you start to impact their trust and commitment to learning.

*1993-94.* The decision was made to restore PE, music, and art to full-time status, increasing class sizes to compensate. The school added some

aides to try to improve the adult-child ratio. But the cumulative effects of the cutbacks had reached critical mass. "Things really blew up in our faces," Hays said candidly.

> A lot of our kids are neglected or abused, and they carry a lot of painful issues. You can't stack thirty, thirty-five of those kids in a small space and expect them to maintain decorum. In the area of behavior management we had a *terrible* time. We had parents who pulled their children because they perceived that the school wasn't safe.

The school faced a crisis. It couldn't afford another year like 1993-94. The decision was made to alter the school's multiage organization to create a further refinement based on teaming.

*1994-95.* Lincoln was divided into three "neighborhoods," each staffed by three or four teachers, two or three paraprofessionals, and one or two certified staff who formerly worked outside the classroom: physical education, music, art and learning-center staff, plus the school counselor and the principal. These staff members will work together as teams. The student-*teacher* ratio will still surpass thirty to one, but the school will achieve a child-*adult* ratio of between fifteen and twenty to one by involving nearly all its human resources in instruction.

Hays said Lincoln staff are enthusiastic about the reorganization and believe it will solve some of last year's problems. Personally, he is looking forward to getting back into the classroom.

> But I recognize there are real big dangers out there, and a miscalculation or misstep could be very troublesome. Legal issues are probably my biggest danger. Dealing with child abuse, IEPs, special education meetings, and things like that, is going to become a real balancing act for me. I have to be careful to adhere to the law.

Hays will examine his responsibilities and discard everything that isn't absolutely essential. He expects to spend much less time communicating with parents and members of the community. Instead of being in his office, available to deal with problems as they arise, Hays will be in the classroom teaching until the children leave for the day.

> People will have to make appointments with my secretary. I think it'll be annoying and troublesome to some; they'll find it an inconvenience, but I've *told* them that the rubber meets the road when the kids are in the classroom trying to learn, and if we don't have the resources, that's where I'm going to be.

## Conclusion

Administrators and state officials must realize that requiring the

implementation of nongraded practices without providing adequate time and financial support not only abuses teachers, but ultimately guarantees failure. Many dedicated teachers will invest immense amounts of unpaid personal time in the first few years of implementation. But few are willing or able to maintain such sacrifice on a long-term basis. This was one reason for the failure of many programs in the "first wave" of nongraded education in the 1960s (Gaustad, April 1992).

Likewise, teachers will hang on during periods of belt-tightening like the one currently affecting Oregon, hoping better times will come. But if time and financial support remain inadequate, eventually many will leave rather than remain in situations where they are subjected to unrelenting stress. Olson predicts that the Eugene school district, which employs a large number of highly experienced teachers, will experience a "mass exodus" of early retirees by the year 2000 if conditions do not change.

Hays is optimistic that the trend in education funding in Oregon will ultimately be reversed. "It won't happen overnight, but I believe in another two or three years enough people in enough places will see the damage, and realize that we're messing with our future in a way that's scary, and that we need to quit it," he asserted. We can only hope that citizens of Oregon and across the nation will recognize the importance of education and act to fund it adequately.

*Chapter 7*

# Implications for School Boards and Administrators

School board members, district administrators, and site-level administrators can do a great deal to encourage the implementation of nongraded practices. Change in the classroom cannot occur without the support and involvement of administrators and policy-makers at all levels.

## Acquire the New Knowledge and Skills *You* Need

Join the educators you supervise and the children they teach in becoming a continuous learner. Learn about recent research on learning and child development, the forms nongraded programs can take, and the instructional and organizational skills teachers need to use it successfully. Learn about the process of educational change. If, like most administrators, you were never taught how to facilitate change or to work cooperatively in groups, seek out opportunities to master those skills.

Give yourself hands-on, or at least observational, experience of current conditions in the primary classroom. If possible, participate as well as observe. "Until I'm *doing* it, I'm not going to fully comprehend some of the things my teachers have to deal with," Principal Dan Hays pointed out.

## Communicate and Facilitate Communication Among Others

Encourage dialogue among staff at different schools and within each school to clarify shared values, create a common language, and set goals for the district and for the school. Encourage educators to share information about problems and solutions during implementation. Provide opportunities

for interaction among staff at various levels of the educational hierarchy as well as for interaction across levels. Keep lines of communication open among staff who are implementing nongraded practices and those who are not.

Communicate with parents and the general public. Although it was only lightly touched on in this Bulletin, building support outside the school is an essential element of the change process. Communicate the reasons change is necessary and how it will occur. Involve parents and community members in planning and implementation. Solicit their perceptions on the effectiveness of different practices and their suggestions for improvement.

Expect misunderstandings and miscommunications to occur as a natural part of the change process (Fullan 1991). Consider the advice given in chapter 2.

## Provide Information and Technical Support

Plan long-term, ongoing staff development in nongraded instructional practices. Arrange training in cooperative professional teamwork for teachers and for administrators. Provide teachers with instructional materials for classroom use as well as publications and other informational resources to consult.

Monitor the progress of teachers, teams, and schools and arrange for help to be available when problems arise. Provide ongoing technical support over several years.

## Coordinate Changes and Remove Conflicting Demands on Educators

Principals must coordinate changes among different rooms or teams in the school, while district administrators coordinate changes in different schools within the district. Central administrators play a vital role in prioritizing the many potentially valuable innovations that compete for limited staff time and resources. "The greatest problem faced by districts and schools is not resistance to innovation, but the fragmentation, overload, and incoherence resulting from the uncritical and uncoordinated acceptance of too many different innovations," asserts Fullan (1991). Make sure too many changes aren't attempted simultaneously.

It is also important to remove conflicting expectations that act as barriers to change. For example, Jim Grant and Anita McClanahan frequently see district administrators encourage teachers to implement nongraded practices, then require them to measure student progress with grade-standard-

ized tests at the end of the year. Work to eliminate such inconsistencies. "Teachers tell me they need a moratorium on conflicting mandates," said Grant.

## Provide Psychological and Emotional Support

Set general district goals with the participation of school staff and parent representatives, but allow different schools to implement those goals in their own way and time. Accept developmental differences among individual educators as well as among schools, and help staff members to feel valued, wherever they are on the continuum of change. Encourage collaboration and mutual support among innovating teachers, but continue to "honor the traditions of older teachers" (Raths and Fanning).

Make sure that teachers set goals commensurate with their resources and avoid trying to do too much too soon. Hays continuously reminded Lincoln teachers "to keep their lives in balance and avoid feeling they needed to do everything at once" (Miller). Principal Betty Campbell of Portland's Boise-Eliot School doesn't allow teachers to teach in multiaged classes until she is satisfied that they thoroughly understand what they are undertaking and possess five "required indicators of teacher readiness": commitment, nongraded instructional skills, curriculum planning ability, high expectations for student performance, and ability to build relationships with students and their parents (Miller).

Work to loosen rigid educational hierarchies. Share power by delegating some responsibilities and involving teachers, lower level administrators, and parents in decision-making. Encourage the development of leadership among others.

Strive to create a school and district culture that supports risk and accepts mistakes as a natural part of learning and growth. Help change district and school norms by modeling the qualities you want to encourage. Praise improvement and creative problem-solving, and focus on how to improve problem areas rather than on where to place blame. Acknowledge your own areas of ignorance, show that you are learning and growing, and be willing to accept help as well as to offer it to others.

## Provide Sufficient Time and Financial Support

Don't set deadlines until you have determined what kind of support your staff will need and whether you have the resources to provide this support. Better yet, encourage an ongoing process of improvement without setting specific deadlines.

Ensure that teachers have adequate planning time scheduled as a part of the normal school day. Allowing schools, teams, and teachers the flexibility to rearrange schedules can help, but in many cases there is simply no way to provide sufficient time without paying for it one way or another: by extending the school day or year, or by hiring paraprofessionals, specialists, or substitutes to release teachers from the classroom. Shortening students' learning time should be considered a last resort.

Finally, school boards and administrators should provide schools with adequate financial resources to carry out all these suggestions, which must be considered ideal, ultimate goals. School boards and administrators can only do their best to communicate the importance of these educational goals to parents and the public, and to enlist their support for adequate school funding.

# Conclusion

Educators in every state are implementing nongraded practices, sometimes on their own initiative, sometimes under pressure. Everywhere they face the same obstacles: incomplete skills and information, inadequate time and money, lack of understanding on the part of parents and colleagues. Moving against the momentum of 150 years of graded education, they struggle to change their own graded mindsets while surrounded by reminders of graded thinking embedded in society.

Jim Grant says he has yet to see a "pure" nongraded program in operation. But everywhere he goes, he sees nongraded practices being used. Teachers are blurring and deemphasizing graded distinctions in mixed-age classes, introducing cooperative learning and hands-on math and science, replacing grade-specific basals with real literature and ABCD report cards with portfolios. Bit by bit, our system of education is undergoing a major transformation. School boards and administrators can do much to facilitate this lengthy, difficult, but ultimately rewarding change by working to reduce the obstacles that impede it.

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## Other OSSC Bulletins on Nongraded Education

• **Nongraded Education: Mixed-Age, Integrated, and Developmentally Appropriate Education for Primary Children** (March 1992). The first of two companion Bulletins on nongraded education written by Joan Gaustad in 1992, this Bulletin examines the history of nongraded education, research on its effectiveness, and ways it is put into practice. (38 pages)

• **Making the Transition from Graded to Nongraded Primary Education** (April 1992). This Bulletin focuses on the delicate process of transition from graded to nongraded organization, offering examples at both the local and state level. (41 pages)

These Bulletins are available for $7.00 each from the Oregon School Study Council, 5207 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-5207. Full payment or purchase order must accompany all orders. A handling charge ($3.00 domestic, $4.00 international) is added to all billed orders. Make checks payable to **University of Oregon/OSSC.** (503) 346-5044. FAX (503) 346-2334.

## New Book Explores the Promise and Pitfalls of Multiage Grouping

• **Children at the Center: Implementing the Multiage Classroom.** In this book, author Bruce A. Miller, senior researcher at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, examines multiage programs at four Northwest elementary schools. Developed cooperatively by the Laboratory and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, the book shares firsthand insights of teachers and administrators who made the change from graded to multiage classrooms. It also draws upon survey responses from participants in a national multiage conference and offers guidelines for smoothing the transition to a multiage structure.

This 123-page publication is available for $15.95 from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 5207 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-5207. Full payment or purchase order must accompany all orders. A handling charge ($3.00 domestic, $4.00 international) is added to all billed orders. Make checks payable to **University of Oregon/ERIC.** 1-800-438-8841. FAX (503) 346-2334.

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