

Degrading the Grades

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One common purpose in any educational system of all teachers, Christian and non-Christian, is to educate each person to his fullest capacity, helping him to develop to the fullest extent of *his* potential: the teacher always guiding stimulating, and challenging his potential. Notice, this purpose is to develop his, that is, each particular child's potential. This implies, therefore, that a bright student has to develop *his* fullest potential, and a duller student, *his* fullest potential.

It is clear that these potentials are not the same. A bright student has a greater potential, a duller student, a lesser potential. Therefore, we cannot expect them to develop the same potentials. Yet, in our schools, and in all other educational systems with clear-cut grades of one through nine, it is expected that all pupils in a certain grade cover a certain amount of material in a certain length of time. In other words, it is expected that all children develop the same potential; namely, that which is set up for them by educators who cut subject matter into concise squares, and prepare text books for specific levels. Knowing, however, that all children develop and mature unevenly, and that some spurt ahead, some remain at a standstill, and some even retrogress, how can we expect that they all complete their learning simultaneously, that is, in 9 months?

Oh, it is true that grades provide a convenient means of grouping children for learning. And that if a child in a certain grade can't meet up with the norms set for this grade, a teacher can make a child re-develop his fullest potential by making him repeat the grade; in other words, he fails! Horrible!

But, more horrible! What about the child who can meet up with these norms, yea, even surpass them? Yes, you've answered it! In thousands of cases these students' resources go untapped! Why? Because, everyone, educators included, evidently feels that children with high IQ's can shift for themselves. After all, they've developed their potential to fit the "average" of the class.

Isn't it obvious that these children are left middle way up a hill, and that to remain there is just as frustrating to them as it is for a duller student to remain on the first 10 steps up the hill? Can't educators foresee that if these gifted students aren't accelerated, stimulated, challenged, and enriched that they, as well as a duller student, are failing and will continue to fail? Can't educators see that this gifted child will become apathetic and lose interest in this non-challenging work? That by the time he reaches high school he probably will have developed poor study habits and an indifference to his school work? Can't educators see that millions of potential brain cells are stymied in a grade that presents no challenge, few stimulating experiences, and little interest for them?

And, a teacher working in a grade composed of so many varying intelligences has little time and opportunity to really stimulate this talented youngster. She must work with the "average" - those who fit the norms of the text books.

And, don't forget, we've not talked about this poor, dull student who is in the same grade as the gifted child, whom we've left stranded with a big *failure* sign printed on his card at the end of the school term and a bigger *FAILURE* sign engraved on his mind, heart, and conscience.

Thus, we catch a glimpse of the truth that in our conventional, graded system,

each individual child is not developing according to his particular potential. As Dr. Goodlad so aptly puts it, "By the fifth grade, less than half the children of a given class are at a reading level considered to be 'fifth grade' - while the others are spread out far below and far above this standard." (1)

Is there no solution?

Let me speak for a moment about a working solution now being experimented with in such places as Dearborn and Gross Pointe, Michigan; Appleton, Wisconsin; Wichita, Kansas; and in Georgia, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Colorado, and others.

This solution has gone under such titles as "schools without grades," "the ungraded unit plan," and "ungrading the elementary grades." What this solution really is, is a system in which several years of a conventional graded system are replaced by a single unit.

Grades 1 - 3 = 1 unit

Grades 4 - 6 = another unit

(etc. through the higher grades if desired)

Each unit has a number of progress levels, usually 8 - 10, geared to reading attainment (the amount of time for moving through a unit varies). The groups of each unit are composed of students similar in chronological age, working level, and social and emotional maturity = *Security*. The children advance by "work levels" based on individual readiness instead of "grade levels" made up of patterned subject matter. A child may be reclassified or shifted to a new teacher at any time.

In this new system there is no success or failure at the end of each year as in graded systems, but rather a level placement devoid of failure, constantly encouraging progress according to individual ability. No child is given an indigestible diet, and no child *ever* fails! No child goes back to repeat learning; each year a child takes up where he left off. In this way, a brilliant child's resources does not go untapped, neither is a duller student met with the frustration of failure. And each child works in a unit made up of students and material geared to fit his potential.

One can see the flexibility of such a system for it ". . . allows slow maturing children a larger block of time to hit their stride, and frees the more mature children from the necessity of jogging along at half speed while others catch up." (2)

Now, you probably have been thinking, "What about a brilliant student who can finish 9th grade work in 7 years? Is he sent to high school?" Definitely not! He would not be socially or emotionally mature enough to go there. This student is given an enriched background - while the less brilliant students just catch a glimpse of this background. So, one easily sees that the brilliant student can be challenged by a teacher who is able to enrich his background and help him to develop his greatest potential.

Then you may inquire about a child who does eighth grade reading and fifth grade arithmetic. Well, usually this doesn't happen, but allowing for the possibility, the answer is fairly simple. He is put in an advanced reading group; but, also is put in a group fitted to his arithmetic level of achievement. Generally, a student such as this will catch up and even out this gap.

It has been reported that in this system:

1. Many students who would fail in a graded system, catch up and go ahead of the others when given a larger block of time in which to work and develop.
2. Tensions in children are reduced without all the rivalry in the graded

system.

3. There is wider leadership opportunity.
4. There is an increased teacher awareness of pupil individuality.
5. The understanding of the school by the parents is increased.
6. There is more teamwork among faculty members - united purpose.
7. More emphasis is placed on long range development in a child rather

than mastery of subject matter.

Thus, in this system of continuous progress promotion, a child never fails. A dull student is not frustrated beyond endurance in trying to keep apace his fellow gifted student. For the brilliant student is in another group having his background polished and enriched. And, the brilliant student never is idle, waiting for his classmates, who are not ready to digest the material set out for them, to catch up. And, each student is advanced through groups according to his particular ability and maturity, thus developing his maximum potential.

1. Goodlad, John I., "Ungrading the Elementary Grades," *National Education Association Journal*, p. 170

2. Tucker, Marina B., "The Shoe Didn't Fit," *National Education Association Journal*. p. 160.

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** Schools working in this kind of a venture differ as to its arrangement. The above is the arrangement as it works in Appleton, Wisconsin.

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