Why Nongraded Schools Are Better Than Graded Schools
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Introduction

In this paper, I talk about both nongraded schools and graded schools. A nongraded school is one in which the students are not divided up into grades (6th grade, 7th grade, etc) according to their age. A graded school is one in which students are divided up into grades according to their age. I will start my discussion by sharing the scientific research on why graded schools are a poor setup for the intellectual development of children, and will include what nongraded schools do differently that makes them better. I will then list some common complaints that can be heard within graded schools and how nongraded schools have solutions to these problems. After that, I will touch on the history of graded and nongraded schools. I will finish by giving some examples of students who succeeded despite being stuck in a graded education.

The Scientific Research

Children Develop Intellectually at Different Rates

"In general, research on [cognitive] development over long periods in children and adults demonstrates big differences between age groups as well as substantial differences between individuals within age groups.” (Fischer & Silvern, 1985, p. 617)

The research that Fischer and Silvern make reference to dates back to the mid-1970s. Fischer & Silvern were quoting the research as still valid in 1985. Today, the same beliefs continue to be held as scientifically accurate (Boyse, 2010). These findings are the biggest reason why nongraded schools are better than graded schools, because nongraded schools leave a child able to develop intellectually at his/her own rate. If a child is not grasping a concept in a graded school, the child often gets shoved into the next part of the curriculum due to time constraints, possibly never catching up. For all the children who could soar far beyond the grade-level work they are doing in a graded school, often many never get a chance to, killing the possibility of them being able to live up to their full potential. In a nongraded school, these things are able to be avoided.

Children Benefit From Having Teachers For Longer Than One Year at a Time

Stability has benefits for children. We see this in the home, and it works in the classroom as well. When children have the same teacher for multiple years, it allows the children to know what to expect when coming into the classroom, it gives them a face and personality they recognize, and it allows them to have an idea of where they might be starting off in their academic content in the next year (assuming sequential content or the teacher keeping in contact with the class).

Teachers benefit from this stability as well. When teachers have had the same group of students before, it allows them to know the general pace that the students work at, it allows them to know the individual developmental levels and personality types of their students (Same Teacher, n.d.), it allows them to know what students will generally work well together in groups, and it allows them to form deeper social and emotional bonds with their students, fostering a stronger sense of community so that children feel safe to make mistakes and try new things. Research has shown that keeping a teacher with her class for even one extra grade level can add up to an extra month of student learning time, because
the students and the teacher don't have to adjust to a new setting like they normally would (Burke, 1997).

The traditional graded school setup generally doesn't have students with the same teacher for multiple years, so the benefits of multiple-year interactions are lost. This isn't the case with nongraded school setups.

Children Benefit In Their Social Development From Interacting With Children of Other Ages In School

As much as school is about education, one can't deny that children need to grow in more than academics to become fully healthy adults. Research indicates that children who are schooled amongst other children of varying ages can benefit from increased self-esteem, increased leadership skills, increased communication skills, and increased prosocial behavior (Katz, 1998). Since graded schooling removes these benefits, it makes sense to consider a nongraded approach.

Grade Retention Has Been Shown to Have Consistently Negative Effects

One aspect that is integral to the graded school format is the promotion of students to the next grade when they successfully pass the course material of their current grade. The darker side of this practice is that students who don't successfully pass the course material are forced to repeat their current grade again. Research has shown that grade retention has been linked to decreased self-esteem, lower school attendance, lower long-term academic achievement, and is known to be one of the greatest predictors of whether a student will drop out of high school or not (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, n.d.). The National Center for Education Statistics listed 1995 data showing that students who were held back a grade had over twice the drop-out rate that students who had never been held back before, and students who were held back for two or more grade levels had almost four times the drop-out rate of never-been-held-back students (10.1%; 22.4%; and 39.3% respectively)(Nat. Center for Ed. Statistics, n.d.). Nongraded schools help to remedy this problem by not having the graded setup in the first place.

Common Complaints in Graded Schools

My Students Often Appear Bored

One of many reasons that students become bored with material in school is because that material is either too easy for them or too difficult (Zamorski & Haydn, 2002, p. 12). Nongraded schooling helps to solve this problem by allowing students to move on to the next concept when they are ready, instead of simply according to the teacher's timetable.

I'm Tired of Disciplining *Insert Student's Name*

Many teachers complain about discipline issues with students. Research indicates that when children are bored or overwhelmed, they are more likely to act out. Because graded schools leave little room for adjustments in curriculum for individual students, this increases the likelihood that any given student will find a concept either too easy or too difficult and then become disinterested in the material and act out (Kinder et al, 1996). Nongraded schooling solves this problem in that it allows students to tackle curriculum more closely to their ability level, reducing issues with the student becoming disengaged from the material.
There's Not Enough Time

Many teachers complain that there is not enough time in the year in order to cover all the academic content that is required of them by their governments. Graded schools constrict the potential time available to teachers to reach their students to one year. In a nongraded school, these same students have multiple years to work on the same concepts if necessary, have less downtime in the beginning of the year due to already knowing the general rules and routines, and have the same teacher that they've had previously, which allows the students to get appropriate individualized instruction faster due to the teacher having a greater understanding of each student.

The History of Graded Schools in America

Schooling in America goes back about as far as the settlers who came to America do. There is documentation indicating that a Catholic school existed in Florida as early as 1606 (National Catholic Educational Association, n.d.). The first public school in America was founded in 1635 (Boston Latin School Association, n.d.). These schools, and others like them, varied in both curriculum and structure, though reading and mathematics were common subjects. If not starting off in someone's house or at the church, such community schools would often be held in one-room schoolhouses. These one-room schoolhouses often only had one teacher.

As the population in America increased, so did the population of its schools. In 1848, to deal with the issue of over-crowding and to decrease issues with discipline, John D. Philbrick decided to separate the children of the school he was in charge of into classrooms according to their age (Quincy Grammar School, 2011; Dunton, 1888, p. 37-38). It was likely he picked up this idea, as other notable educationists in the U.S. did, by hearing about or observing the Prussian system of education, which already had a national graded system of schooling in place (Dunton, 1888, p. 86-87; Brouillette 1999; Sanders 2010). Over time, the rest of Massachusetts public schools and schools in the other American colonies adopted the same format (Dunton, 1888, p. 38). Now today, graded schooling is the norm and nongraded schools are but a blip on the radar.

The History of Nongraded Schools in America

Nongraded schooling was the original form of schooling in America's thirteen colonies. Often this took the form of parents teaching their children how to read and teaching them about the Bible. Sometimes a similar measure of teaching took place in a dame school, where one woman from the community would teach other community member's children for a fee (Brouillette, 1999; Dame, 2012). After public schools arose though, and graded schooling finally took its place, nongraded approaches were largely forgotten until the late 1950's.

In 1957, the Ford Foundation funded research into alternative educational methods such as team-teaching and multiage classrooms. The findings of the research started to bring into question the value of self-contained classrooms and revealed the lack of educational versatility that standard school buildings allowed (Anderson, 2002). This, along with the book “The Nongraded Elementary School” authored by John Goodlad in 1959, spurred a large interest in alternative educational models and soon nongraded schools/programs started to pop up around the U.S. Unfortunately, due to inadequate knowledge and lack of administrative and community support, many of these schools and programs were halted (Schugurensky, 2002).
In the early 1990's, renewed interest came to nongraded education due to Goodlad publishing a revised edition of his book. The states of Oregon and Kentucky both issued a mandate for nongraded primary education (Pavan, 1992). Unfortunately, as calls for accountability and standardized testing increased, some of the steam behind the nongraded education belief waned. As of 2012, it appears Kentucky's mandate for nongraded K-3 education still stands (Kentucky Department of Education, 2012), and other nongraded schools can be found sprinkled sparingly throughout the nation.

**What Now?**

Will we, as a country, come to embrace nongraded schooling more fully in the future? Will we let our hands get dirty enough to say that we have tried something different and have seen the end result, instead of simply throwing a few pilot studies and concluding the idea's full value based on those results? I want to end by bringing up a few students who defied the odds and proved that set age-level curriculum is a repressive idea.

Meet Taylor Wilson. He is the youngest person in the world to ever build a nuclear fusion reactor. At the age of 14, with the help of Ron Phaneuf, a professor of physics at the University of Nevada in Reno, Taylor successfully set off a nuclear fusion reaction in a reactor that he had built. A year later, he was meeting with the Department of Homeland Security to see if his research could help them in their counter-terrorism efforts. Now, at age 17, he has developed a scanner that can sniff for nuclear material and weapons coming into the country, and it can do it at a sliver of the cost of what the American government was previously spending (Dutton, 2011). If his parents had forced him to give up his nuclear dreams in favor of doing more grade-level curriculum, he would not be where he is today.

Meet Gillian Lynne. At age 86, she might be currently past her prime, but in her day, she was known as an incredible dancer and choreographer (Gillian Lynne, 2012). Perhaps you have heard of some of the works that helped to make her famous, productions such as *Cats* and *Phantom of the Opera* (About Gillian Lynne, n.d.). While Lynne is a multimillionaire now, she got her start visiting a specialist because her school thought she might have a learning disorder. She had had trouble sitting still and her homework had always been late (Robinson, 2006). It turned out that Lynne simply had a different kind of genius. Had Ritalin been available in her childhood and Lynne gone to see a different specialist, she may have ended up half-awake the rest of her school career, while teachers continued to complain at her lack of obedience to do their rote-memorization assignments.

Meet Robert James Fischer. He was a high school dropout... but he loved chess. Most people in this scenario would likely have ended up living a minimum wage life, but Fischer ended up winning over $3,000,000 from a single chess match. Fischer also authored or co-authored a couple of books (Bobby Fischer, 2012) and appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* (Price, 2011). While Fischer's life may have ended somewhat poorly, with him dying as a recluse in Iceland (Bobby Fischer, 2012), what could have happened to Fischer's talent with logic and sequence if he hadn't been stuck doing the same work that every other kid in his class was doing?
References:


