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ABSTRACT

A comparative investigation of the place of the sixth grade in public education used a shadow study technique to address three questions: (1) What is a sixth grader's day in school like? (2) In what ways do programs provided for sixth graders differ, depending on where the grade is located in the school system? (3) How does what is known of the nature and needs of sixth graders match up with the program actually provided? Findings indicated that three types of sixth grade exist: (1) the traditional, self-contained, elementary-oriented, single class group taught by one teacher; (2) the departmentalized sixth grade, secondary in nature and form, in which the student group moves from class to class to receive instruction from different specialist teachers; and (3) the teamed sixth grade, in which instruction in basic subjects is provided by a team of two to five teachers who cooperatively plan the program. Generalizations from the data concern the types of instructional arrangements, the sixth grade in general, and where the sixth grade should be located in the structure of schooling. It was asserted that no justification exists for using full departmentalization in the sixth grade, and that the self-contained elementary-oriented program is equally unwise. The strong socialization drive of sixth-grade students should be used positively in the pursuit of learning. (RH)

THE SIXTH GRADE: CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

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The sixth grade reflects more diversity in organizational arrangements than any other grade in the K-12 continuum. In grades seven and above departmentalization has had a virtual hammerlock on schools. In grades five and below the self-contained classroom has been by far the most prevalent practice. But in recent years, one is likely to find departmentalization, teaming in any one of its many variations, or the self-contained approach being used in sixth grade classrooms.

Even the school unit in which the sixth grade is located may not indicate the type of instructional organization employed. An increasing number of elementary schools departmentalize the upper grades while a few middle schools maintain an almost self-contained classroom in the sixth grade. The sixth grade then, is both literally and figuratively caught in the middle of the K-12 public school continuum. It has not always been so.

For more than eighty years, since the graded structure with its ladder concept was first implemented, the sixth grade was firmly ensconced as a part of elementary education.

But in the 1960's the middle school was introduced and a new wave of school reorganization began rolling across the land. A central feature of this educational innovation was a school organizational pattern that placed the sixth grade in an intermediate unit in a 5-3-4 plan. In the last twenty-five years sixth grades by the hundreds have thus been incorporated into middle level units. In fact, the shift has been so extensive that the 5-3-4 plan is now the most common single form of school organization in the United States, replacing the older 6-3-3 pattern which had held the top spot for some forty years.

Yet, the number of sixth grades still found within elementary units is substantial and no complete demise of such an arrangement is expected in the foreseeable future. Other sixth grades continue to be housed in K-12 and other comprehensive units of organization. So sixth grades may be located in elementary schools, middle level schools, or in other grade configurations. Since middle level education, despite its widespread existence, has not gained acceptance as one of three distinctive levels of education, those sixth grades that are located in elementary schools operate under the aegis of elementary supervision and administration, whereas those sixth grades found in intermediate level units almost always fall under the control of a secondary education

division. Obviously the rationale, approach, and practices of elementary and secondary education differ -- yet sixth graders are of the same age regardless of the school unit in which they are housed. And at age ten or eleven they are not just children nor are they yet adolescents. So the questions--Are elementary programs and practices too "childish" for emerging adolescents? Are secondary programs and practices generally inappropriate for young people still not adolescents? -- are pertinent.

It is time to take a careful look at the place of the sixth grade in public education. In many respects it has been the victim of organizational and administrative decisions rather than the cause of those decisions. Neither elementary nor secondary education has, in my view, taken an adequately proactive stance concerning the nature of the school program that should be provided for these young people who are just moving out of childhood and taking first steps toward adolescence.

The study I am reporting on here was designed to address three specific questions: (1) What is a sixth grader's day in school really like? (2) In what ways do the programs provided sixth graders differ, depending on where that grade is located in the school system? and (3) How does our knowledge of the nature and needs of sixth graders match up with the program actually provided?

The Plan of the Study

The study was patterned after NASSP's ninth grade project, How Fares the Ninth Grade?, which was completed in 1985. The data for the present study were gathered during the first observance of National Middle Level Education Week, March 7-14, 1987 using the "shadow study" technique. Observers shadowed a randomly selected sixth grader during the entire school day of Wednesday, March 11. Using a simple form and following a limited set of directions observers made a record of the events and activities, completed a brief general information sheet, and conducted an end-of-the-day interview with the student.

In addition, observers summarized their findings and reactions and completed a checklist of program characteristics.

State representative to the Middle Level Committee, members of the Middle Level Committee itself , and other volunteers or recruits completed studies.

After the studies were logged in, the survey sheets and checklists were set apart. The studies were then duplicated and packs of randomly selected studies, with identifying data removed, were mailed to members of an analyst panel.

To conduct the initial analysis of the studies submitted a panel of twenty-three principals, teachers, and teacher educators was selected. Each analyst received 18 to 20 shadow studies,

randomly selected, along with suggestions and guidelines for carrying out the analysis. In order to help insure a fair analysis, each individual shadow study was included in three different packets and thus was read by three different educators.

The comparative aspect of the study employed a checklist of program characteristics that were deemed desirable in a sixth grade. This list was given to the observers in a sealed envelope so as not to influence their observations. Following completion of the shadow study observers opened the envelope and completed the checklist indicating the degree to which the sixth grade program they observed seemed to evidence these conditions and characteristics.

The checklists were placed in one of the three categories (entry grade, terminal grade, or middle), tabulated, and the results statistically analyzed to determine the differences in school programs that might be attributed to the placement of the sixth grade. In order to provide a further analysis, the studies were also categorized by the instructional organization being used (self-contained, departmentalized, or teamed) and additional comparisons made.

The entire group of shadow studies, the analysts' reports, the general information sheets, and the tabulated checklists were available to me and J. Howard Johnston during our preparation of

this final written report.

Altogether, one-hundred thirty-two (132) studies were completed and constitute the data base for this study. These studies were made in 45 different states.

While the students selected to be shadowed were chosen in a random manner, the schools do not constitute a true random sample. They were simply those schools available to the observers and thus can only be identified as a representative group of sixth grades.

Though limitations exist and all desirable scientific technicalities could not be met, taken together the studies and the reports constitute a powerful body of data. These snapshots of reality reveal much about the ways sixth grade students are being educated.

Drawing generalizations is always a risky business. Few of us, however, can resist the temptation to derive an apparently evident conclusion from some number of cases. While risky, the pursuit of generalizations is an important matter, for lessons to help understand present conditions and to direct future activities are derived from this procedure. In fact, the improvement of education is highly dependent upon generalizations.

Education which involves complex human beings on both sides of the desk is, however, particularly hard pressed to derive scientific, unchallenged conclusions from even its most tightly controlled research studies. In an instance such as the present study, we are particularly cautious in drawing conclusions for the sixth grade studies defied easy generalizations.

A major reason for this is, in itself, a generalization about the sixth grade that has considerable importance. It is because the sixth grade in the United States displays such a variety of organizational and instructional arrangements that generalizations about the total grade are limited in number.

As the studies and the analysts reports were read it became apparent that it was difficult to draw a single picture of life in the sixth grade, to make generalizations that were representative of clear majority practices. What became evident was that there are, in fact, three sixth grades, each identifiable and fairly distinct.

The first is the traditional sixth grade, self-contained and elementary in nature and form. It is a single class group instructed in all or almost all the basic subjects and skills by one teacher. This teacher assumes responsibility for students' behavior and personal development as well as providing formal instruction. Many such sixth grades continue to exist, but not just in elementary schools. Essentially self-contained sixth grades are

occasionally found in middle schools.

The second is the departmentalized sixth grade, secondary in nature and form. A student group moves from class to class to receive instruction from different specialist teachers. This plan has been invading upper elementary schools for many years, even before the middle school movement became influential, so the school unit in which a departmentalized sixth grade is located may not be a middle level school.

The third sixth grade is the evolving sixth grade, the teamed sixth grade. Here instruction in the basic subjects is provided by a team of two to five teachers each with some subject area expertise but who can and may plan the total instructional program cooperatively. Sometimes the subjects are correlated or fused and occasionally a thematic unit may be pursued by the team. While the teamed sixth grade is fairly distinctive from the other two basic plans, it covers a wide range as far as the degree of interdisciplinary implementation goes. In all too many cases, while a team has been organizationally established, departmentalized instruction continues. In other cases two or more teachers teach the four basic subjects and plan together closely.

This concept of the three sixth grades became somewhat central as a way of drawing pertinent conclusions and making contrasts.

At the same time, there are numerous statements that can be made about sixth grades in general. Readers should be reminded, however, that the 132 studies involving over a thousand classrooms do include examples of almost any condition, and generalizations that are derived from the group cannot be viewed as describing any one school or all sixth grades. The studies readily reveal the variety in quality that exists.

In the most extreme form of generalizing these quick assessments could be made relative to the basic differences that emerged when looking at the three sixth grades. In self-contained sixth grades students sit for long periods of time doing seatwork. In departmentalized sixth grades students sit for long periods of time listening to teachers. In teamed sixth grades no single generalization is possible as either of the above conditions may be prevalent as well as various interim conditions.

Other generalizations that emerged from the shadow study reports concerning these three instructional arrangements are:

Teachers in self-contained sixth grades seemed less concerned with discipline, permitted more student movement within the class, gave greater attention to individuals and gave students more choices. There was more flexibility in the use of time and in the seating arrangements employed. Limited attention to exploration or exploratory areas was evident.

Opportunities for student involvement in clubs and special activities were infrequent and/or limited in scope. Content coverage was somewhat less obvious while skill instruction was quite apparent. The school day itself in self-contained sixth grades appeared to be markedly shorter.

Teachers in departmentalized situations seemed more pre-occupied with control and behavior, engaged in more whole-class activities and lectured more frequently. The focus of activities was largely on the covering of content per se with little or no relationship to students' developmental needs or current interests.

Teamed situations cover a continuum from departmentalization on the one end to nearly self-contained classrooms on the other with both ends overlapping the other groups. Generally, however, limited utilization of the interdisciplinary instructional opportunities provided by teaming was evident.

Where Should the Sixth Grade Be Located?

Where, then, does the sixth grade belong? It depends on who you ask. Opinions vary. And so do relevant studies. The shadow study data do not show that sixth grades in elementary schools are providing better programs than sixth grades in middle schools -- or worse programs. This is true whether you use an objective measurement (statistical analysis of checklists) or a subjective judgment based on reading and digesting the studies. Likewise, a tabulation of opinions expressed by observers reveals people on both sides of the question.

It is clear that there are advantages that accrue to a sixth grade located in an elementary school which still follows a predominately self-contained approach. More personal attention, less stress, and more interrelated instruction are examples of likely results. On the other hand, a middle level school with a secondary approach would probably provide more exploratory experiences, greater variety in approaches, and more ample instructional and physical resources.

Each type of school has advantages and disadvantages. The answer to the question, "Where does the sixth grade belong?" is not to be found in the administrative unit which houses it. Many factors must be considered -- the nature of the school above and below, school size, the competence and

attitudes of faculty, for instance. The key question to ask is, "Where can sixth graders' educational and developmental needs best be met given the conditions prevailing in the local situation?"

General Conclusions and Recommendations

The effective, committed work of sixth grade teachers should not be overlooked or minimized. The positive, affective climate found in nearly all sixth grades is a major plus. Critical analyses of the educational enterprise, such as the present study, must always be viewed in the larger context and in full awareness of the many positive aspects of the American educational enterprise. It is all too easy to analyze critically, failing to recognize the good that is inherent in all public education.

Yet professional educators have a responsibility to pursue the improvement of education. Those who work at the middle level are especially sensitive to the enduring importance of the educational experiences youth undergo during these developmental years and they feel a special responsibility.

This research study was not designed to be an exposé, another of those rhetorical reports which seem to appear with some regularity and delight in pointing the finger. Rather, it was an

honest attempt, by practicing educators, to study the status of the sixth grade. It was based on the belief that this grade is in limbo, so to speak, and has not heretofore been specifically addressed although there have been inklings that all was not well in the sixth grade. This study, it is hoped, will help to focus attention of this important grade and lead to efforts that will make sixth grade education more effective in meeting the varied needs of these ten and eleven year old youths.

Upon reflection, we have to conclude that the shadow study data provided no real surprises, no truly unexpected conditions. In almost all respects, these data reaffirm the findings of earlier shadow studies and of other research projects. The data support, too, what most anybody who is close to schools knows intuitively. Logic and one's cumulative experience in education would have led one to predict the nature of the findings. The fragmentation of the school day, the passive nature of so much schooling, the excessive sitting, the generally good behavior of pupils, the conscientiousness of teachers, the constant motion of early adolescents, all of these conditions are well known.

While the major weaknesses were predictable, so too were the positive conditions that make it clear that the basic elements and conditions needed for effective schools are in place. Teachers, with very limited exceptions, are conscientious and caring. Students are

happy, generally well satisfied; they speak positively about their teachers, exhibit overall good behavior. Schools, though they vary in age and condition, almost always provide adequate physical facilities in which instruction can go on. Furniture and teaching materials are usually ample. Schools are well organized and administered.

While lacks and gaps can quickly be identified and a wish list generated by any school, the more significant truth is that school improvement is really not held up by money or the things money can buy as much as it is by the attitudes of adults -- teachers, administrators, board members, and parents -- and by the perpetuation of old assumptions and traditions that are no longer valid.

Do Programs Match Developmental Realities?

The conflict between Mother Nature and the behavior and learning expectations of youth that are inherent in formal education is long-standing and, to some degree, inevitable. Mass education does involve some conformity, some imposition of adult judgments and standards -- that is part of what youth is to learn. Yet, we know learning is most effective and efficient when its procedures and content are closely in tune with the nature and needs of the learner.

It is proper, therefore, to examine sixth grade programs in

light of the realities of human growth and development. To what degree do programs reflect an awareness of the developmental needs and learning styles of ten and eleven year old young people? Do sixth grade programs assist youth as they face and move through the developmental processes associated with early adolescence? Are the known and applicable principles of learning reflected in the educational activities provided?

Questions such as these need to be addressed. And even when theoretically correct solutions to the discrepancies noted are not easily attained, or even attainable, these matters still warrant serious consideration.

In the area of physical development there are clear discrepancies. Observers noted consistently the conflict between the physical need for movement and the sedentary nature of schooling. One analyst was "appalled" at the amount of sitting and said "I can't imagine how those squirrely sixth graders could stand it." Another commented, "Sixth graders are required to sit for longer than we have a right to expect!" Almost without exception both observers and analysts commented in this vein. The growing bodies of eleven year olds call for more opportunities for physical movement than schools presently provide.

Lacking more legitimate occasions for physical activity, sixth graders cross and uncross their legs constantly; they sit on their

knees, they shift their positions every few minutes, they create reasons to get up and move around, they fidget.

Another major aspect of their physical development is, of course, sexual maturation. With very limited exceptions, March 11, 1987 passed without the schools providing instruction or discussion on either the physical, social, or moral aspects of sex. If this, indeed, is the reality, it must be altered.

Nor was the tremendous variance in the level of maturation among sixth graders a factor in the activities planned for that day in March. It appeared as if a sixth grader was a sixth grader irrespective of sex, height, weight, stage of development, or learning style. Individualization of instruction, so logical during this period of life, was sadly lacking while whole class instruction predominated.

Socializing has been called their developmental right, something they must learn how to do as one of the major tasks of adolescence. In this realm of development, young people are largely left to learn those lessons by independent study and trial and error. Very few indeed were there instances noted that could be construed as attempts via the school program to give instruction or leadership in this area. Again, observers and analysts almost uniformly pointed out the very limited opportunities sixth graders are given to socialize, particularly in a learning context.

The sixth graders, however, did exert their "right" and socialized incessantly, even if surreptitiously.

Teachers did display sensitivity toward the emotional development of students. By providing individual help, recognizing individual differences, by touch, and by offering non-judgmental support the shadow studies revealed many, many sensitive, caring teachers were at work in our sixth grades. In departmentalized classes, however, these conditions were less evident than in self-contained rooms.

Where the programs generally fell down was in the active promotion of opportunities for sixth graders to express their personal views, to try out various responses in order to judge peer and adult reactions, to experiment with ideas that involved feelings as well as information, to think critically.

It is generally recognized that a major aspect of adolescence is the generation of a unique identity by each individual. It is during the earliest stages of adolescence that young persons begin to initiate independent thought and activity, to see themselves as distinctive persons, able to make decisions and judgments, to stand apart from their parents.

Schools traditionally have sought to contain rather than enhance this growing independence. And certainly the shadow studies provided evidence that this condition still prevails. Time

after time observers and analysts decried the lack of involvement, the limited opportunities for independent action or judgment, and the infrequent give and take that leads to personal growth.

"Schools are capable of helping significantly or hindering seriously the development of sixth graders." This statement by Joel Milgram is indeed true and it lays a heavy responsibility on schools. While the shadow studies revealed only a very few instances of overt hindering they also included disappointingly few examples of ways sixth grade programs were helping students' overall development. A thoughtful review of learner characteristics and sixth grade programs provided by these studies will disclose a mismatch on many points. There is a lack of congruity between much of what is done to and with sixth graders and their known nature and needs. This cannot be denied.

Final Conclusions and Recommendations

1. There is no justification for choosing to use full departmentalization in the sixth grade. There may be situations where conditions do not seem to permit an immediate choice. The preparation of the faculty and/or the faculty's mental health may seem to rule in favor of utilizing departmentalization in the sixth grade. In such situations, departmentalization should be openly acknowledged as the temporary arrangement and specific plans, including related staff development activities, should be initiated for

moving away from departmentalization.

The clear conflict between the developmental needs of sixth graders and the fragmented, subject-centered departmentalized day must be acknowledged and incorporated into program improvement plans. The content dealt with at this grade level simply does not require the level of sophistication and expertise found in the single subject specialist; whereas the critical importance of their developmental needs calls for a smaller number of teachers who know them well and have some contact with them beyond a single period. Educators probably have not been sufficiently conscious of what is given up when organizing to provide separate subject specialists. Losses, while subtle, probably outweigh the presumed benefit of expertise in subject matter, especially for sixth graders.

2. On the other hand, it seems equally clear that a purely self-contained, elementary oriented sixth grade is no more appropriate for emerging adolescents. The social and exploratory needs of early adolescents are not likely to be met adequately when only a single teacher directs the entire day save for, perhaps, art and music. Ten and eleven year olds are emerging from childhood and are seeking understandings and experiences beyond the limited scope of the usual self-contained classroom. Their need for exploratory experiences is impelling. While a single teacher may be able to provide much of the variety needed there has to

be a context and support for so doing that is not normally found in an elementary school

3. In order to serve its role as a transition school a middle level institution needs to organize the sixth grade in a manner that is different from the fifth grade but certainly not just as the eighth grade is organized. A two person team for the basic academics or a three subject block with one primary teacher for instance are appropriate ways of organizing a sixth grade. The shadow studies make evident the value of teaming in offsetting the effects of "bigness." Middle level schools tend to be fairly large which may make curriculum options greater but also produce stress for younger students and lead to the anonymity that plagues contemporary education.

4. In order to provide the needed climate, context, and curriculum continued efforts should be made to establish a distinctive middle level. This level, which usually includes the sixth grade along with the seventh and eighth grades, encompasses the greatest percentage of students who are in the transition period between childhood and full adolescence. Programs directed to the needs of these changing young people would, therefore, be more likely to develop.

There are many subtle conditions and assumptions present in a school that considers itself elementary or secondary. Without

being called up for examination or reconsideration these factors nevertheless underlie many administrative, curriculum and instructional decisions. Both sets of conditions and assumptions have validity when applied to the general population of elementary or secondary education -- but neither is really valid when applied to those who are enrolled in the sixth grade. As persons "in transition" the educational experiences of these students, as well as those in the seventh and eighth grades, need to be directed by assumptions that apply specifically to them. Their diversity must be recognized. The rate of the changes that are taking place must also be taken into account.

5. Strong efforts to actually implement interdisciplinary instruction must be put forth. The continued fragmentation of learning, even in situations where teachers are organized as teams, retards achievement as well as other aspects of development. In fact, one of the major disappointments in the study was discovering how little correlation and interdisciplinary instruction exist in schools claiming to be practicing interdisciplinary planning and teaching.

6. The strong socialization drive of sixth grade students needs to be utilized positively in the pursuit of academic learning. Cooperative learning, peer teacher, and other techniques that do this have been shown to be effective in enhancing achievement.

The use of such approaches should be implemented.

7. Sixth grade students who are reaching for independence should be given increased opportunities to make decisions and participate actively in the teaching-learning process. The high degree of passive, exclusively teacher directed, learning now found in sixth grades is not defensible. A higher level of intellectualization needs to be encouraged.

8. The guidance services available to most sixth graders are woefully inadequate. The excessively high student-counselor ratios, which averaged over 400 to 1, all but eliminate the opportunity for counselors to do preventive group guidance and confer regularly with classroom teachers. When no teacher-based guidance program, such as an adviser-advisee arrangement, is in place, it is almost certain that the varied developmental, social, and personal concerns of these emerging adolescents will go unattended by school personnel. Sixth graders need an understanding adult advocate as they move into a multi-teacher day and such a person may or may not emerge and be available when needed.

9. Period length, whether 45, 50, or 55 minutes, does not match the attention span of sixth graders or recognize their physical development. Conscientious efforts should be made by teachers to provide varied, hands-on activities and changes of pace. Such activities should also incorporate opportunities for interaction

between students and between students and teachers

The Big Truth

Out of this study, as in the comparable studies previously conducted of the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, comes one major truth, a truth so central to improvement efforts that it must not be by-passed. The teacher makes the difference. It is not school unit, grade organization, interdisciplinary teaming, relevant curriculum content, or anything else, that is the essential factor in the improvement of middle level education. It is the quality of the classroom teacher.

Surprisingly small were differences in the shadow study data that could be attributed to school locale or instructional organization. Teamed situations, though having much greater potential, were not automatically better. And a self-contained classroom with an excellent teacher is hard to beat for sixth graders.

Teachers, inevitably, hold the trump cards and the opportunity to play them as they will. To improve sixth grade programs staff development efforts must be so designed that

teachers will grow in their understandings, attitudes, and self-concepts. Some efforts, of course, must also be directed to developing improved administrative procedures, establishing common planning periods, securing more adequate instructional resources and other needed supportive factors, but without giving attention to teacher growth these other improvements will have little lasting effect.

A Final Word

The sixth grade is a nice place for youngsters to be. Life there, whatever its failings may be, is pretty exciting. Curiosity is heightened. New interests are emerging. Major physical changes are already evident or eagerly anticipated. Socialization is becoming an all-engrossing facet of life and to be among one's peers at such a time is "duck soup." Risks, at this level, are still limited and behavior, though increasingly exuberant, is still somewhat restrained.

For teachers as well as students the sixth grade has much to commend it. Sixth graders have high regard and appreciation for their teachers. They express pride in their schools.

Improving sixth grade education is, then, not a hopeless task of countering deep-seated and negative views. Existing conditions provide a solid foundation. Teachers are conscientious and caring. Schools are effectively administered. Available materials are sufficient. No revolution is called for or needed. Yet, there are shortcomings evident and obvious student needs that should be addressed. We hope this study of the sixth grade will provide guidance for efforts to make life in the sixth grade even better.