

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES INVOLVED?

It is only too true that grouping in schools is based on various and sundry procedures. Among the reasons given for each procedure is the matter of tradition, factors of economy of time and effort, or the belief that at the time it seems the best way to achieve wanted results. However, thoughtful persons realize the urgency for the type of grouping that is carefully thought through and recognizes the implications in grouping procedures in schools which should foster the aims and means for developing effective citizens of a modern world. This discussion highlights the importance of grouping for both academic and social achievement and the responsibilities for decisions by school boards, superintendents, and principals—as well as teachers. The participants also touch upon how our manner of grouping affects children in terms of flexibility of grouping, make-up and size of the group, and the length of time for which a particular group shall be maintained. Stephen M. Corey, Robert J. Havighurst, and Daniel A. Prescott, of the School of Education, University of Chicago, participated in this informal discussion which was recorded by a wire recorder and then transcribed as you read it here.

*Grouping Children: A Discussion*_____

STEPHEN M. COREY, ROBERT J. HAVIGHURST, AND DANIEL A. PRESCOTT

Corey: The editors of *EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP* have asked us to discuss the general problem of the grouping of children in school. What seemed to you to be the major issues in this area, Prescott?

Prescott: We must first consider *what* grouping will produce the most effective learning. We must then ask what information about children is necessary in order to provide the basis for this grouping. Finally, we must consider the administrative problems involved in bringing the groups into being.

Corey: I infer from what you say that you believe there must be grouping of children in school.

Prescott: Yes, I do. The schools have to take care of all of the children and this necessitates grouping. We cannot afford individualized instruction in the sense that each child is taught separately. Such a definition of individualized instruction would not be the best for children anyway.

Corey: Havighurst, what do you see

as the chief issues in this problem of grouping school children?

Havighurst: This isn't exactly an issue, but in order to get the discussion organized we need to consider the purposes for which children are grouped, that is, why do we group children?

Corey: Well, why do we?

Havighurst: I should say that we group children so as to promote their growth in the academic sense as well as their social development.

Prescott: And we can't leave out of consideration the factor of economy.

Havighurst: Yes, that is true. Grouping saves the time of teachers.

Corey: Let's talk a bit more about the major purposes that are achieved through grouping. What are they?

Havighurst: The purposes that I have just mentioned, namely, that we must promote both the academic learning and the social development of children. This may be done by a variety of types of groups under various conditions. For example, in some cases one may want

a group of children who are all at practically the same stage of development of some skill. At another time one may want a group which includes a variety of levels of achievement so as to promote growth through social interaction.

Corey: What that means is that if children are grouped appropriately in terms of one or two criteria, the groups might be quite heterogeneous from other points of view. If you group youngsters of approximately the same level of social maturity to take part in planning a party, they might be at various levels in terms of their ability to spell or to work arithmetic problems or in terms of other types of academic achievement.

Havighurst: Yes, that's true. Suppose we explore further the meaning of the term "groups." Prescott, what do you think is the range of the possible groups?

Prescott: There may be groups as small as four or five reciting or demonstrating their skills to a teacher who wants to identify weak spots and see exactly how she can be of most benefit to them. I also see groups as large as six hundred or more who might be brought into the school auditorium to have an experience together such as listening to music or watching a dramatic production.

Havighurst: That indicates the range of groups in size. We could, also, indicate a variation in terms of time duration. For example, we might have one group that stays together for only half an hour to accomplish one objective or we might think of a group that started to work at the beginning of school and continued as a group

throughout all the twelve grades.

Corey: Wouldn't you say in general that in most school situations there is too great an expectation that the groups will persist for a long time? It seems to me frequently to be difficult for school groups to break up, even though the jobs on which they work imply that they should. There is a persistence of the group long past the time when it best represents the best grouping for whatever purposes are being achieved.

Prescott: Many groupings, of course, should be very temporary. For example, a group in school might get together, plan and execute a project and then disband immediately.

Havighurst: On the other hand, one can understand why there is this persistence of grouping and why it is desirable. Once the group gets to functioning successfully as a group it is well worth while to try to keep the children together and explore their possibilities for doing other things together successfully.

Corey: What would you say a teacher might look for as an indication that the grouping of her pupils is satisfactory? Give an example of a group you have observed which seemed to be functioning successfully and tell why.

Havighurst: The most general criterion of successful grouping is satisfactory progress in learning appropriate behavior. That doesn't imply, of course, that unsatisfactory or inappropriate behavior results from faculty grouping alone.

Corey: Let's get down to a specific case.

Havighurst: It is always easier to identify the failures. We all probably know of ninth grade classes in which it

is quite impossible to have a successful party. The girls want to do certain things and the boys, other things, and they just can't get together. When we observe a little more closely, we discover that the girls are nearly always physically larger than the boys.

Corey: Does that mean that they are more mature socially usually?

Havighurst: We know that at that time of life girls are from a year to a year and a half advanced over boys physically and in our society that carries with it an advanced degree of social maturity.

Prescott: I recall an illustration of this in two schools that were studying the need of adolescents to learn how to get along with one another socially. One of these schools decided to have social dancing as a part of its regular curriculum. The start was made in the seventh grade where social dancing was required in physical education. As a result a number of the boys became truant. When we looked into it, we found that these boys were mostly little boys who were not yet ready for the dancing kind of association with girls. By contrast, I have observed another school which arranged for dancing in the gym during long noon hours. There the boys and girls did not come together as a single class group. Instead they danced together as they matured over a period of years.

Corey: Your illustrations so far have to do primarily with social development. Can you describe some specific school situations where the purposes to be achieved were primarily academic? Say I am the teacher of a fourth grade arithmetic class, including thirty-five children, what could I look for in order

to determine whether or not this particular grouping of youngsters was best for their achievement in arithmetic?

Havighurst: If the teacher is going to treat the whole class as a unit for arithmetic instruction, she certainly must find out whether or not everyone in the class is nearly enough at the same level so that all can profit from a group lesson. As a result of this inquiry, the teacher may learn that she has to break the class of thirty-five up into subgroups.

Corey: Well, they've all used the same textbooks for three months and they've worked through the same workbook. Isn't that sufficient basis for assuming that they are close enough together to benefit from group instruction?

Havighurst: No, that isn't sufficient reason if the children have been promoted almost entirely on the basis of increased age from year to year.

Prescott: Even if they are homogeneous with respect to mental age, there will be a wide variation on the basis of specific abilities and other characteristics.

Havighurst: Particularly in the case of reading, we know that many otherwise bright children have severe reading disabilities. Consequently one cannot assume that all children of the same mental age are ready for the same kind of reading lessons.

Corey: What are some of the facts that we know about the range in ability in achievement of the typical fourth or fifth grade class with respect to reading ability or arithmetical ability or any other criterion that might be used?

Havighurst: The range in a typical

fifth grade with respect to reading is from average third grade level to average eighth grade level. Your slowest student could be compared to the average youngster in the third grade and your best reader to the average youngster in the eighth grade. Yet they would all be in the fifth grade.

Corey: You've talked about the range in reading ability, but the same thing would be true with respect to any other measure of academic achievement, would it not?

Havighurst: Yes, the difficulty with thinking of a homogeneous group in respect to academic achievement is that arithmetic achievement and reading achievement and any other types of achievement do not develop at equal rates. Consequently, you must either try to average these or group your children on the basis of one variable. When the latter is done, you have a group that is heterogeneous with respect to all of the variables that did not enter into the grouping.

Corey: I'd like to raise another point. What persons in the school system must accept primary responsibility for grouping children? Say that I'm a seventh grade teacher with thirty-five boys and girls, and I feel that I can't treat them all as a single group for all purposes. How far can I go as a teacher? What can I do? Say that I'm teaching in a city in Texas.

Havighurst: If you're teaching there you may be powerless to determine just who will be put into your classroom. You might have either all white Anglo-American children, or all Mexican children or possibly all Negro children.

Corey: That's a tough problem. I'll

escape it by locating myself in northern Illinois.

Havighurst: Even then you don't escape the problem completely because in any city in northern Illinois the Negroes may live in one part of town and all go to one school. Consequently, the teacher still has relatively little control over the factor of race in grouping and, too, in all large cities children are segregated in neighborhoods which differ sharply in social economic status.

Corey: Well, you have called attention so far to things I can't do, but I'm still a teacher in the seventh grade with thirty-five boys and girls before me. What can I do within the limits you've called attention to?

Prescott: What we've been implying is that decisions about grouping are made at a number of different levels. The school board or superintendent decide who should go to which school, whether or not there should be seventh and eighth grades in local schools or junior high schools serving a large area. Then there is the question of grouping on a school-wide basis which is primarily controlled by the principal. Lastly, there is grouping within classes that the teachers must arrange.

Corey: That's a good analysis, Prescott. Let's talk about each of these three levels separately. What decision, for example, might the school board make that would tend to effect the grouping of school children?

Havighurst: Suppose I start the discussion by giving my notion as to how the school board and the superintendent might deal with the problem of grouping. First, they establish policies which determine whether or not the children of different social backgrounds are

thrown together or kept apart in the schools.

Corey: Isn't that decision really a consequence of the neighborhood grouping? If you have an elementary school at the corner of Madison and Eighth Streets, the youngsters who go to that school must be drawn from that neighborhood. Isn't that decision somewhat beyond the control of the ordinary board of education?

Havighurst: Somewhat, but clearly not entirely. In the first place, the drawing of boundaries for elementary school areas can be manipulated just as congressional districts are gerrymandered in order to include or exclude certain people. When you get up to the junior and senior high school where the geographic radius of attendance is much greater, the decision is very much in the hands of the school board.

Prescott: Isn't the school board subject to a great deal of community pressure as to whether or not it should mix socio-economic groups in schools? That issue is frequently not brought out into the open. Would you say, Havighurst, that the school board policy should make for the maximum flexibility of grouping?

Havighurst: Yes. This problem is more than a technical one. It really becomes a basic issue in the democratic community. The school board actually has it in its power to segregate pupils of various racial or economic background for almost all of the years of their schooling. Similarly, it has in its power deliberately to throw them together so that they can share experience.

Prescott: Merely throwing children together will not solve the problem. We've got to plan things for them to

do and help them to work out ways and means that will enable them to grow in social interaction.

Havighurst: That is true, but if children are never allowed by the regulations of the school board to get together, they certainly cannot grow in their ability to work together.

Corey: Both of you tend, when you're talking about grouping, to concentrate on social development. Do you feel that social growth is very central in the thinking of most teachers or administrators, or are they more constantly disposed to think of grouping as benefiting academic achievement?

Prescott: Grouping in order to bring about better academic achievement is just as important.

Havighurst: Most school administrators are about equally concerned with social development and superior academic achievement.

Prescott: There is another point I'd like to make in connection with the function of the superintendent. The kind of grouping that a teacher works out with her class is bound to be a function of the kind of information she has about the children and their background and their needs. It lies within the prerogatives of the school board and superintendent to determine the information a teacher will have about her pupils, and this in turn determines whether or not she has a basis for sound grouping.

Corey: I know that both of you recognize that we must take into consideration certain social realities. If either of you were president of a school board, would you attempt to get into the same elementary school children from lower class, middle class, and

upper class families? Such children have quite different traditions and attitudes toward school work and future vocations.

Havighurst: I would certainly attempt to do just that. And I am sure I could get community backing if there was adequate discussion of the problem of democracy and its implications for grouping.

Prescott: What you're saying, Havighurst, is tremendously important and correct, but we certainly need much more than discussion. We must be certain that the teachers have a sympathetic understanding of the differences of social background of these children.

Havighurst: That's very true. I'd go all the way with you in insisting that until the teachers understand more about children with various social backgrounds, merely throwing them together in the same classroom is not going to bring good results.

Corey: If you were living in a very large city like Chicago, Havighurst, and if in the community in which you were living there was a public school including boys and girls from many socio-economic backgrounds and also an excellent private school, would you send your own children to the public school to mix with youngsters from heterogeneous social and economic backgrounds?

Havighurst: You put it very well! That would be a test of my belief in democracy. If I really believed in democracy, and if there is a good public school system whose teachers understood children and social realities, I would have an obligation to send my children to the public school.

Corey: That's a good answer. What a person does, I presume, is a much better test of what he believes than what he professes. Let's turn now from the decisions of school board members to those that the principal of the particular school might make that would have a bearing upon the grouping of children.

Havighurst: Before we get on that point, may I add something to our discussion of grouping at the community level? We haven't mentioned the problem of differentiation of curriculum in various kinds of secondary schools. If we organize our high schools on the basis of vocational expectation, we will have grouping in terms of occupational goals which is quite different from the grouping we would get if we had the so-called comprehensive high school which provides vocational and college preparatory courses within one school.

Corey: Prescott, what would you do if you were the principal of an elementary school and wanted to bring about better grouping of children in that school?

Prescott: I'd work with my teachers to figure out what kinds of experiences they thought would be maximally educative for the children. We would go from there to a consideration of grouping. Some of the experiences would imply groups larger than the regular class. Other kinds of educative experience might require groups smaller than regular classes.

Havighurst: What we might call the classical problem of homogeneous grouping is really a school-wide problem. Whether or not pupils should be segregated into groups in terms of intelligence or school grades is a deci-

sion that is made primarily by the principal and is usually characteristic of the entire school. One teacher alone rarely makes that kind of decision.

Corey: There has been a great deal of criticism about homogeneous grouping, but I have always thought that it represents at least a rational attempt to group boys and girls so that certain kinds of learning can be enhanced. Do you think that is true, Prescott?

Prescott: Not altogether. Learning depends on a lot of things besides I.Q. It depends upon the physical maturity of the child, his emotional security, his home situation, his relationships to other children in his social group, his cultural background, and the experiences he has had that motivate him or do not motivate him for a particular kind of learning.

Corey: Even though the expression "homogeneous grouping" does not necessarily mean grouping in terms of a particular criterion it has come to imply grouping based primarily upon intelligence or achievement tests results.

Havighurst: Let me say a word about homogeneous grouping in terms of one criterion. I presume in ninety per cent of the cases of homogeneous grouping one criterion is used or at most—two—either I.Q., or a combination of I.Q. and school grades. I would say flatly that grouping which puts children into groups for the entire day based only on these two criteria will actually defeat its purpose of promoting maximum academic learning, to say nothing of its effects upon social learning.

Prescott: In fact in content subjects like social studies, variety in background and variations in ability produce very

educative differences of opinion and attitude, and very stimulating social interaction. In activity programs children with a very wide range of academic abilities can make contributions in construction, dramatic play, or painting.

Corey: Would you say that the practice of putting youngsters in a certain grade because they have reached the same chronological age is better than employing the criterion of I.Q. for grouping?

Havighurst: I'm almost tempted to say so, because if all of the children of one age are put into a certain grade then the teacher must cope with the problem. But if she believes that homogeneous grouping has been achieved, she may think that the problem is solved.

Prescott: The phony idea in connection with homogeneous grouping is that when you classify children with respect to one or two factors, you will get similar basic learnings from all of them. This is simply not true. Nothing can take the place of a knowledge of the factors that motivate the learning of the individual child.

Another type of decision that the principal could make which affects grouping has to do with the kind of records that pass along from teacher to teacher irrespective of the particular kind of grouping that is in effect. Either the principals or the teachers must work out a cumulative record that will give them the information they need about individuals in order to group them. The principal has major responsibility for seeing to it that these records are developed and used. He must also help teachers to interpret these records as they work with the children. We cannot trust to grouping alone, but

must see to it that the teacher adapts instruction to small groups and to each individual.

Corey: We've talked so far of the importance for grouping of decisions made by the board of education and by the building principal. What is it that the teacher herself can do that will make for more effective grouping? Havighurst?

Havighurst: Regardless of how well the problems of grouping have been dealt with at the community and school level, the classroom teacher can really make or break the situation. On the one hand she can spoil the best administrative plan for grouping. On the other, even if these problems have not been dealt with very well at the two "higher" levels, the classroom teacher can still bring about groupings that will greatly facilitate learning.

Corey: From the point of view of the classroom teacher, it seems to me that the best single criterion she can keep in mind in her attempts to group youngsters is the particular job that they are working at. There are all kinds of jobs that youngsters undertake in school. One of them may have to do with reaching a better understanding of American history, another job may have to do with planning some recreational activity for the ninth grade. The job to be accomplished determines the best type of grouping.

Prescott: That is true, and there are jobs that children of quite heterogeneous backgrounds can do together and succeed at. For example, at the planning of a classroom project, there are many different knowledges that various children have that will permit them to function in planning of the project

and carrying it through to successful completion. This may take a week or a month or a year.

Havighurst: Prescott, do you think that the classroom teacher can be assisted to do a better job by grouping pupils on the basis of certain factors or are you suggesting that regardless of what kind of grouping may be in existence, everything depends on the classroom teacher?

Prescott: I do think it would be possible to assist the teachers a great deal by providing for grouping on a multiple factor basis. Most school systems are not yet able to do this because their records do not contain the necessary information about the children. If I were forced to classify on just one basis, I would use chronological age. One must recognize, however, that if such a classification is made, extreme adaptations in instruction by the teacher are required.

Corey: Such as?

Prescott: Well, I know of a first year high school class in which a child turned up with an I.Q. of 56. He was reading at the second grade level. On the other hand, he fitted in beautifully with his group and took part in many of its activities. He spent part of his time in one of the vocational sections in high school as a clean-up boy where he was being trained as a sweeper for the mills, an occupation at which he would be successful. His training, however, in citizenship was superb and the other ninth grade youngsters liked him. He has the prospect for successful vocational and civic adjustment which would not be the case had he been thrown into a group which was like him with respect to I.Q. or reading ability

and consequently kept away from boys and girls of his own "social" age.

Havighurst: That is a good example of the existence of a number of separate groups in a school system, and the shifting of this boy from group to group as each suited him best for various aspects of his school life.

Prescott: This lad had been promoted from year to year consistently with a one hundred per cent promotion plan. The teachers in that system, however, are studying their pupils individually and none of them made academic demands upon him that he could not meet.

Havighurst: Prescott, it seems to me that your example shows how a system of grouping within a school was made to serve admirably the needs of the youngsters who would not have been served at all either by mental age grouping or by some other hard and fast grouping. I would say, therefore, that you have given an argument for Corey's point—namely that the grouping depends upon the task or job or activity.

Corey: We've talked about many things in connection with the grouping of pupils and probably have put the problem in a broader frame of reference than that used by most people. In conclusion let's attempt to identify some of the major generalizations about grouping on which we agree.

Havighurst: I should like to emphasize the importance of having a school structure that makes it relatively easy for groups to form and dissolve. In other words, as soon as the job for which the group was formed is accomplished there should be no obligation for the children to continue to work together in

that same group. There should be many opportunities for the spontaneous formation of groups in order to get a particular job done.

Prescott: Your last sentence, Havighurst, emphasizes the importance of looking at group formation in terms of the job that the groups want to accomplish. There is a wide variety of jobs youngsters undertake in school and that argues for a wide variety of grouping.

Corey: In that same connection it should be possible for boys and girls to move from one group to another as such movements benefit them and enable them to make a greater contribution to the group activity.

Havighurst: If teachers keep in mind the fact that decisions regarding the effectiveness of grouping in school are made at three levels, it may enable them to escape some frustration. On the community level, the school board and the superintendent make decisions that affect the groups that actually meet in school. On the next lower level, many decisions are made by the school principal. In the degree that he works with teachers in developing school policy, there is apt to be a maximum of understanding and cooperation. At the lowest level, at least in a hierarchical sense, the teacher makes many decisions that have to do with the formation of groups. To do this effectively, however, she must have an adequate body of information about each child.

Corey: You don't mean to imply that these judgments made at various levels are independent. As you said earlier, a teacher by her behavior can negate all of the good "grouping" decisions made

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UNFAIR TO BABIES

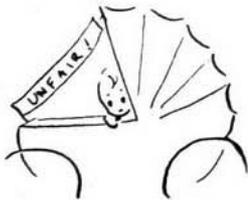
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because we haven't really helped them.

Maybe it's our job to help Gertie find satisfaction in being respected as an adult so she won't have to find it in pretending to be a little girl. Maybe it's our job to give Abbie recognition and affection so she won't have to take out her frustration on youngsters.

Tough assignment? I'll say it is! But that's a job as adults we often fail to assume—the job of meeting human needs.

Go back to your cribs, play-pens and perambulators, babies. Your strike has been called off, or rather, we're taking it on for you—a strike against name-calling and for an action program for helping each other, for meeting the human needs of all of us—babies, youngsters, and adults.



GROUPING CHILDREN

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by the school board and the principals.

Prescott: We all are in agreement, I know, that the grouping of children is not only necessary from the point of view of financial economy but it is also absolutely necessary in order for youngsters to learn the things they ought to learn in school. It sounds paradoxical, but it is true that the most highly individualized instruction for some boys and girls necessitates group instruction. In other words, what they as individuals need most to learn can only be learned in the group situation.

Havighurst: If it is necessary to group boys and girls in terms of one factor only—the factor of chronological age is best. This does not imply an argument in favor of the chronological age groupings if it is possible to take other factors into consideration.

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