

Space limitations make it impossible for us to tell of the various other techniques and many avenues of exploration we are undertaking. However, perhaps one of the most significant results of this study to date is that we, as children, parents, teachers, and research

workers have come to see the importance of "getting the group habit" of thinking, of learning to study the society created by boys and girls in their groups, and of realizing implications for meaningful, happy, democratic living in our schools.

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## *Moratorium on Grade Grouping*

HOWARD A. LANE

Attention is directed to some obsolete concepts of the grouping of children in this article by Howard A. Lane, professor of education, New York University, New York City. Mr. Lane indicates that a sharp revision of many of these ideologies is an urgent need if these youngsters are to reap the benefits of poised and happy maturity and suggests that the "whom" of classroom living ranks equally, if not higher, than the "what."

"YOU SHOULD SEE JAKE." A seventh-grade teacher was speaking. "He's fourteen years old and can't read; he just got out of reform school. You'd think he never heard of arithmetic. He's afraid of all white folks. Isn't it grand that he can be in my room for a year?" When I had been revived from the shock of this display of unscientific sentimentality by a teacher with a master's degree I sought to learn more about Jake.

He had grown his first fourteen years in a rural slum in a region that provides little schooling for children of Jake's ancestry. His family had recently moved to a city in another region in quest of the higher wages of industry. Jake had followed when released from "reform school" where he had spent more than a year for petty thievery, and finding himself to be a victim of compulsory education laws he reluctantly went to school. There he found Miss Ryan who asked that this large,

unkempt, illiterate boy be in her room. Little resistance was encountered from other teachers, although some questions were raised about maintaining standards and the good name of the school.

In Jake's new school the course of study calls for detailed study of textiles in seventh grade. Jake arrived with the topic of cotton. He couldn't read about cotton, but he had planted, chopped, picked, and ginned cotton, and knew far more about it than even Miss Ryan and the author of the geography. Too, he could dictate letters to people back home who sent cotton plants and seeds, and even small bales of it. Jake had abundant information about grades and yields of cotton, and the price they had to have to get a pair of shoes and some new overalls in the fall. While Miss Ryan had no tests or other absolute proof at hand I was disposed to believe that in her room, abounding in materials and occasions for varied types of reading and genuine uses for it, Jake

had gained much in interest and ability in reading, although he did not match the fictional concreteness of seventh-grade level.

Jake's story has a sequel. He was promoted to eighth grade. His new teacher had standards (she disliked children). Here was a boy in her room who was not ready for her group. In a few weeks Jake was regular only in his truancy. He became a fugitive from the attendance officer, fell into his old patterns for significance and excitement, and soon was in a new "reform school."

Jake was a victim of the Procrustean bed of the concept of grade levels and homogeneous grouping. By this inverted concept of grade standards countless children are dulled—unfitted for living in this world.

Children are grouped in a school having more than one teacher. Various criteria for grouping have been employed. They need not be recounted here. The current practice of grading, which term implies sorting into groups according to quality, is relatively new. I have a notion that historians may write in 2047 somewhat as follows:

"The graded system was one of the most persistently unreasonable obstacles to block the progress of education in the early Twentieth Century. Professors, test-makers, publishers, and clinical practices developed strong vested interests of pride and money and effectively disdained all suggestions for change. They even refined a loose system of grouping according to age, and introduced all manner of criteria as if it were really good education to require a child to spend his school day with children as nearly like himself as could be arranged."

### Concepts in Metaphor

Clearly the beginnings of the graded system were based upon the recognition of a thoroughly valid concept, that of maturation as a factor in human learning and adjustment; but it brought in its wake a great surge of materials and standards directed to levels of development, and attributed to these levels the reality of concreteness when they were never more than the products of a figure of speech, a peg on which to hang the principle of maturation. Growth levels, as such, simply do not exist. They are but crude descriptions of where the child was last seen on many observable paths of his growth. "At what height should a boy be introduced to basketball?" is as reasonable as the question, "At what mental age should he be introduced to long division?," and probably it is more significant. It is here to be granted that a basketball coach would find more gratifying talent among one hundred boys six feet tall than among a like number a foot shorter, but that coach would know, too, that among the five-footers he could find boys who could outplay some of the big fellows.

### "Science" of Education

During the two decades following World War I the refinement of grouping became a major fixation among educators. Had not the Army learned that people are different? And hadn't it profitably developed differentiated training and placement according to tests easily administered and scored? None but the most brashly unstable and the hopelessly ossified brains questioned the validity of this development. To all free and sound minds it was clear that

a child fails to learn or to conform largely because he is with persons unlike himself. Professors in schools of education called this development a science of education and set about quickly to develop gleaming techniques by which a bright young man with a master's degree could sit in a downtown research laboratory and with clear conscience know better than his teacher that Jimmie Works should be in grade 8f, while his friend Tommy Shirkey would make a better adjustment in 8x. To be sure, arguments raged in the high places about homogeneous grouping. In theses and yearbooks numerous educators validated their opinions by this new science, but the arguments had to do always with questions of criteria and reliability of measures and classifications, rather than with the validity of the whole concept of grading.<sup>1</sup>

Has the time not come for a re-examination of the social, psychological, and ethical concepts upon which grading is based. Dare we indulge in self-analysis and ask, "How did we get this way?"

#### Outmoded Patterns

Our schools became common during a time that all good men believed that humans are conceived in sin and born in iniquity. The good life is a progressive struggle against a sinful background. Growth and development are processes of becoming better and better. If this be true a good eight-year-old is better than a seven-year-old; a senior is more worthy than a freshman.

<sup>1</sup> A notable exception of this charge is: Alice V. Keliher, "A Critical Study of Homogeneous Grouping" *Teachers College Contributions to Education* No. 452 Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York: 1931.

Another shadow of the past is the reason-to-be of the common school. It came to the Western culture as a part of the Protestant Reformation which determined to teach men to read in order that they might know the Scriptures and not be victimized by unscrupulous parsons. Gradually age six became a time for beginning school, and became first grade because few children learned anything approximating reading before age six. Despite the fact that reading is now firmly established in our culture, and only the strongest counter-influences and confusions can prevent a child's learning to read, reading remains the chief concern of primary teachers and the basis for grouping little children in school.

#### Comparisons in Vignette

Perhaps some thumbnail sketches of a few children will cast light upon the assumptions of the validity of grouping according to academic progress and promise.

*Jerry* is the youngest child in his class because his birthday came so late in the year. He will always be the youngest in his class unless he is especially dumb, and if he should turn out to be bright he is likely to be "put up" where he will be still younger. At home he has an older brother and sister and able, vigorous parents. He has to stomp and yell and pout for every bit of attention and significance he experiences. The school's graded system rules that he must live likewise at school.

*Little Algernon* reads well and adds two-place numbers such as 23 and 45, although 27 and 47 are too much. He is a gentleman and not yet six years old, and is a most satisfying child because

he makes no disturbance, and is always clean. He is afraid to try to catch a ball; he wouldn't try to skin up a tree. He retreats into reading and other abnormal activities that bring pats on his head. He violates the integrity of his young eyes and denies the demand of his body for activity, and is daily less acceptable to his associates and increasingly disdainful of them. Thus another superior mind is lost as a potential influence in a world mortally ill of lack of competent, accepted leadership.

*Tommy* can't read, spell, or do arithmetic. He is strong. His school compromised; he is in fourth grade where he can't read the books because they are too hard, and can't play with the children because he is too large (rough). He has taken to bullying, teasing, and defiance to assure himself that all is well with him. Tom may have to go back still farther, or go to vocational school. He needs to be with older children among whom his physical abilities can be employed but can't dominate. He can't read wherever he is.

*Nedra* is beautiful, mature for her thirteen years, and vital. She hasn't read much and giggles about the hopelessness of her arithmetic in grade 7B4. She doesn't get much respect at school, being so far behind in her studies that she can't take time for singing and dancing—but she is noticed now as she passes the drug store on the way to school, and mother says she can go out with boys when she gets to eighth grade.

*Lois* "can't learn anything." She is in her first year of school, but is with the sixth-grade children. She looks like the picture of the mongoloid imbecile in the abnormal psychology book. She has

gained much in friendliness and happiness since she came to school. The children understand and help her, and have been taught how to "pin her arms" when she has infrequent spells. These children will be less revolted by, and more helpful to, atypical children than before *Lois* came to live with them.

*Dudley*, says the record, is sixteen years old; his I.Q. is 82 according to one group test administered three years ago. *Dudley* is slow, dull, hazy. He is passing only one course in ninth grade; the instructor of that course has been asked to explain to the principal. The foregoing was true in November, but one of his teachers needed data for a term paper and administered tests to *Dudley* and other pupils. On three of the ten sections of that test *Dudley* made perfect scores. He went "off the test," above tenth-grade level, on all sections. When confronted with the implications of the test results *Dudley* maintained, "Oh, heck! That test wasn't fair for me. I knew all that stuff." Further conversation revealed that *Dudley* was but thirteen years old. A boy likes to be older, especially a large one. And that I.Q. test—"Aw. That was baby stuff, and anyway I broke my pencil." *Dudley* was sent to senior high school forthwith and elected to study geometry, chemistry, and physics. He didn't want to take English, but, of course, there was no escape from that. He did exceptionally well in geometry, chemistry, and physics. *Dudley's* real I.Q. was something more than 150; the great tragedy in *Dudley's* life—or was it the world's—was that he accepted the school's judgment. On finishing high school he found a job in a filling station that made his living and left plenty of time for reading.

### Names Don't Fool Them

In most of the first grades of this land we find the bluebirds, the robins, and the woodpeckers. Their names vary from place to place; their characteristics vary little. The first grade teacher, and her "superiors," profess to love the woodpeckers as much as the bluebirds, but these slower children smell the implications of the fact that they are dispatched on errands or stuck in the clay when company comes, and their mammas are told "He's a little slow in his reading, but he is a splendid child." Most parents and many teachers tell every child that he could be a bluebird if he would just try, although the children can readily detect this preposterous prevarication by counting the chairs in the reading circle—I have yet to see any person under twelve years of age learn to read by trying. Trying too hard is a dominant feature of the past of most remedial readers. Following the significant principle that every human being must think well of himself, the woodpeckers and many of the robins develop attitudes such as "Reading is too hard, too dull. I can't do it. I don't like it." "Who wants to be a sissy, and read?" I once knew a little girl who insisted, "I can read writin', but I can't read readin'."

It appears that standardized group tests continue to be used as the principal basis for grouping. Tests are alleged to be superior to opinion in their freedom from bias and halo-effect favoring the more pleasant and quiet and well-bred children liked by teachers. I have yet to find a group test which purports, even in its advertising, to be a valid measure of the achievement of an individual. They are, by title and defini-

tion, made to test groups, to test outcomes of experimental methods, and secure data for use in research, NOT to measure the ability and achievement of individuals in groups. Yet every reader of these lines will have known instances of a person other than the child's teacher ordering the child's removal to another group on the basis of his few quantitative scores and in sheer ignorance of the child's personal needs and attitudes or of the probable influence of the change upon his parents and their attitude toward him. This is doubtless the most unscientific practice to emerge from the "science" of education.

### Logic Detoured

Among the most lamentable effects of systems of grouping and consequent standardization of materials and assignment of materials and methods to "levels" has been the development of the special classes and schools for varied deviations from teacher readiness and toleration. By what extreme aberration of logic has come the practice of grouping together children of like deviation. Do non-readers become readers by living with other children who cannot read? Do non-English-speaking pupils become glib in English in association with other people who speak haltingly? Some schools have gone to the extreme of gathering together predelinquent children to make them good. The human being is a product of his culture! Abraham Lincoln, in response to the argument that slaves were really better cared for and happier as slaves than they would be as free men, asked, "Is there any good thing that no man has ever asked for himself?" I wonder if this

simple question alone does not reveal the basic fault of the special class, the special school.

### Marking and Moralizing

A by-product of the graded system, of all forms of quality grouping, is the unhygienic atmosphere of marking, promotion, retention. Success in a group is highly tinged with moral judgment. If the child has tried, if he has done his best, he is sent along. Should he trifle, exhibit interests and behaviors out of accord with the pictures-in-the-head of the teacher he is quite likely to be sentenced to doing more time in the group and with that subject matter that had already failed to engage his interest and gain his concern. Not long since, a high school pupil related to me her unseemly gratification in making the highest score on a departmental standardized test. Next day she reported her dismay and outrage at having at last been identified by her teacher as the "one with the high score" and told publicly "I'm going to lower your grade. You are not working up to capacity."

Often it seems to me that most of the ills, aside from neglect, heaped upon children by teachers and parents result from this disposition to moralize and judge. The terms *deserve*, *merit*, *fault*, *blame*, *good*, *bad*, *correct*, *wrong* loom large in the vocabulary of teaching. In an address, Dr. C. B. Chisholm<sup>2</sup> states forthrightly that the world's ills culminating in war result from the teaching of morality, a notion of right and

wrong apart from the exercise of good sense and a comprehension of conduct appropriate to circumstances.

In our adult motivations of children we must be very confusing to them. We can not in thoughtfulness be surprised that to children we become "Old Man Lane" and "Old Lady Grundy" despite our efforts to remain young, smooth, and attractive. We teach children to be considerate, to say "Pardon me," to take the smaller apple, the nearer piece of cake, not to reach across people, nor to push ahead of them in line. We are amused at the nursery school child heard to remark to the new pupil as they contended for the slide, "We don't do that way in this school. We take turns. First I go, then you go. See?" Yet, when he gets to first grade we urge that he strive to be a bluebird, contend to be at the head of the class, and get the most problems in the test.

Parents and teachers commonly motivate their children to hasten in their maturing with comments such as "You're not a baby any more." "You act more like a first grader than a big boy in third grade." And, of course, we maintain a system which states that if you're not a good first grader you can't go to second grade which implies that first graders are definitely inferior and unworthy and fit objects of disdain and attack. These same adults are quite outraged when Junior reduces this logic to its absurdity and socks baby brother, and gets a few first-grade scalps on his way home for lunch. In fact it has become traditional to dismiss the younger children in time to allow them to reach the safety of their homes before their older superiors and masters are loosed upon them.

<sup>2</sup> Readers seeking to think through this problem will find great value in this and other lectures contained in the pamphlet: *William Allison White Memorial Lectures "The Psychiatry of an Enduring Peace"* The W. A. White Psychiatric Foundation, 1711 Rhode Island Avenue N.W. Washington 6, D. C. 40 cents.

This implication of superior worthiness stems from ancient philosophical error which held that difference in persons, things, and ideas were attended by difference in goodness. Many teachers, curriculum directors, and parents carry pictures of perfection in their heads. They know what a good six-year-old is like, what a good group of ten-year-olds should know and feel. Children whose ways, knowledge, and feelings match these pictures are good members of the group; those approaching the pictures are said to be in a stage of "readiness"; those deviating markedly from them are in the wrong group.

Some years ago I observed in my back yard that unresolved contention, rivalry, and determination to prevail were the order of the day when every one there was three years old, or six, or nine. When, however, there was an age range of several years, cooperation and an amount of consideration for each other were dominant, and there was scorn aplenty for the persistent one who was determined to have his own way despite the wishes of the others.

I have been trying to think of instances in the work and play of the world in which effective social groups are homogeneous. These occur to me: the Rockettes at Radio City amaze the observer by presenting forty well-matched young women dancing as one; the palace guards are all of a height, identical in appearance and manner—but these are spectacles. Even a good football team coordinates different abilities of twenty or thirty talented young men; a construction gang performs amazing feats of creation, but no one of them working alone could make a house as well as could his grandfather.

### Revision a Requisite

New knowledge of human development and new purposes for education demand sharp revision of the purposes and practices of grouping. Of human development we know that man is a product of his culture. He acquires the tools, attitudes, loyalties, values of the culture in which he grows. He learns his own reactions to that culture. It must be an active, significant, on-going atmosphere for growth. We know that human development follows general patterns, even rates, of growth as dawning capacities select appropriate experience from environment. Thus a rich, varied, challenging atmosphere for growth must be provided along with affectionate, challenging, stimulating leadership to enhance wholesome development and maximum realization of potentialities.

Of society we know that the prime fundamental of our time, and of education in our time, is the learning of the ideals and skills of worldwide cooperation, else this civilization is soon to end. Thus we see these trends in educational practice—from instruction and dictation by the teacher to challenge, understanding, guidance, and group planning of goals and procedures; from prescription of things to be learned to the provision of opportunity, and stimulation to know oneself and one's ever-expanding group, growing until it encompasses One World living under law; from the ivory tower of knowledge for its own sake to the active world of the real fundamentals that function genuinely in day-to-day living and in the building of a mature tomorrow; from disciplined regimentation to leadership in ever-increasing freedom;

from imposed authority of status to authority won by recognized competency and demonstrated, friendly understanding; from contention and rivalry to cooperation in which a child's talents are assets to his friends rather than claims to distinction from them and to advantages over them; and from individualized activity to genuine group enterprise directed to significant contemporary purposes of children in which each can indeed be his "brother's keeper."

With the foregoing fundamentals, quality grouping, even close age grading, is in conflict. If individuals are to be valuable to each other they must differ from each other; some must need the help and resources of others; each must have the opportunity to grow up in a group, becoming increasingly valuable to younger and different associates.

If education continues to be conceived in figures of speech such as: education is a mountain to be climbed, a river to be crossed, an amount of material to be consumed in rationed doses, it is then doubtless better to pack the climbers, the swimmers, the vessels into squads ready for congenial amounts of climbing, swimming, pouring. But today we see education as growth and development in a culture with both the developing individual and his culture constantly changing. This herding together of children into like groups is a direct denial of this concept.

### A Plan for Change

I should like again to propose a transition plan for grouping children in elementary schools. I see no hope for high schools and colleges until their managers mature morally and intel-

lectually, and abandon the Carnegie Unit as a means of counting the amount of an individual's schooling.

Let us have two grades in the elementary school, *upper* and *lower* might suffice as names for them although I should like to get away from implications of greater worth for either. Children would remain in the lower grade until the ninth birthday. (Chronological, NOT mental, age.) From the upper grade they would go to a somewhat departmentalized and larger intermediate school.

We shall have four lower grade teachers working as a team with one hundred children, and we can handle more if we must. These teachers will have neighboring rooms and some common facilities and equipment. They will teach with their doors and hearts open to all of the children in that grade. When we first organize this grade the teachers will deal out the children into groups of approximately equal size. They will then make shifts in grouping in terms of individual children and each teacher's suitability for working with certain individuals. They will manipulate the grouping so that the groups will differ in average age, some predominately older, some younger, but each will include children from the entire age range. This will permit children to be with children predominately younger or older as his peculiar needs will require. This need is seldom related to mental age or academic skill.

This team of teachers, knowing the children as people, will in consultation make such shifts in grouping as individual and group needs indicate. In these mixed groups children will actually and clearly be different in all aspects of

growth and adjustment. In the mixed group no one could expect everyone to achieve even similar goals, do the same lessons, learn from the same books. Yet, most of us discuss each day the United Nations, the blessings and perils of soap and water, the merits of radio programs, the price of butter, the antics of Congress, and other significant topics in social groups that range thirty years or more in age. In this new grade, teachers cannot escape the responsibility for providing opportunities for activities which engage the common interests and permit the participation of individuals with differing interests, resources, and abilities without attendant differences in value and respect.

#### **Relationships Appraised**

In this new school each child will have four teachers, each concerned with his adjustment and development, each aware of his uniqueness. Each will call one of these his own teacher. These teachers will be selected with care that each has unique skills valuable to young children. Children must have opportunity and guidance in music and rhythms, in a wide variety of arts and crafts, in the realm of science, and in hearty play. Someone must be up to the minute on the good new books for children as well as those which children have loved for generations.

This school will not assume that a child who delays reading until age

seven or even eight will be a poor reader any more than a baby who walks at sixteen months will grow into an awkward gait. These teachers will know that there is slight relationship between brightness and the time of the emergence of the insights basic to learning the three R's. There will be no temptation to any teacher to press for achievement of skills in order to please the "next" teacher or avoid her scorn. Remedial work, that ill-conceived child of the graded school, can be driven forever from the lower school and will seldom, if ever, be needed in the upper.

We can be sure that only the child with exceptional constitutional handicaps, or most unusual circumstances will have failed to develop the basic insights and skills of the three R's by his ninth birthday. Children in the upper grade will be able to work with written materials concerned with ideas and concepts with which they are familiar. They will engage in increasingly valuable group activities and in pursuit of their answers to the rich variety of curiosities so characteristic of that period of development. Their team will consist of three teachers, or four. The skills will at no time be ends in themselves, but instruments to improve the quality and extend the range of genuine experience.

Such is the plan we propose. Will it work? We shall never know until we try.

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