

# Grouping and Individualizing in the Elementary Classroom

**Teachers and pupils work together to coordinate group activities that will lead to individual growth.**

**G**ROUPING in order to meet individual needs is a tremendous responsibility. The teacher must coordinate activities so that individual differences will be cared for. Each child must have an opportunity for belonging and for success. He must feel self-worth through his contribution to a successfully completed group effort. Such coordination and guidance call for a teacher with many capabilities. This teacher must be skilled in releasing ideas instead of drilling self-imparted or self-directed information; must be skilled in helping children use research technique in broad areas of learning instead of grinding through each book from cover to cover as a matter of habit; must be a keen observer of personalities to discover interests, desires, fears or physical inadequacies which may alter, enhance or impair individual progress, instead of holding each child to a rigid group standard of performance; and must be skilled in maintaining, through individual and group participation, an interesting, meaningful, and stimulating classroom environment instead of a teacher-dominated atmosphere.

This teacher must also be able to guide cooperative group planning, knowing what responsibilities the particular group members are capable of accepting in decision making, as determined by their physical, mental, social and emotional maturities. This guidance will of course

include plans for individual and group evaluation during the working periods as well as final evaluation techniques. By no means of least importance, this teacher must be able to plan, execute and evaluate with the entire school staff, parents and community in solving problems of general interest instead of taking the proverbial bag of tricks to the classroom and closing the door. Such a role is frightening to many teachers who may be accustomed to definite, fixed periods and clock-like assignments. The transition, therefore, can only be made as the teacher feels comfortable in taking each new step away from a seemingly very secure position.

One handicap the teacher in the self-contained classroom faces today, if individual needs are to be adequately met, is class size. Meeting individual needs must of necessity come through successful interactions with the other individuals within the group. Possible interactions mount rapidly as class membership increases. Mathematically speaking, when two individuals are present one initial interaction is possible, when four individuals are present six initial interactions are possible, when 20 individuals are present 190 interactions are possible, when 30 children are present 435 interactions are possible, and when 35 children are present 595 interactions are

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possible. This means that the number of possible initial interactions is increased by 129 percent when a class has 30 children as compared to 20 and by 213 percent when a class has 35 children as compared with 20. This mathematical presentation may not be realistic or even desired if examined closely, but it points out the difficulty of meeting all individual needs within the group when a teacher must work with 30 or more children.

In spite of the handicaps that exist, most teachers spend a major portion of their lives trying to improve the learning process with each individual in their classrooms. Frustrations arise over and over again, however, when teachers' seemingly hopeless attempts to maintain a classroom atmosphere conducive to good mental health and maximum growth for each child, fall far short of their hopes and desires.

There are some things that could be done to release tension on the part of teachers and children as they attempt to satisfy their needs and desires. Class size could be reduced to 20 children; trained assistance could be provided for teachers to gather materials, keep records, make charts, and the like; the school year and the school day could be so structured that teachers would not feel the need for being in three places at one time; and most important, teachers could be taught the possibilities in such a Utopia.

The common reaction to such suggestions is, "You dreamer, you!" "What do we use for money?" or, most common of all, "You know that isn't possible." "Isn't possible" deals such a final blow to creative thinking and forward moving action that the individual usually gives up by

saying, "What's the use," or is made to feel quite out of place for even suggesting such a wild idea.

Educators have taken many steps toward meeting individual differences effectively though they often hesitate even to think of the great changes which could make dreams a reality. First of all, school people sometimes parrot the fact that not all children can be treated in the same way. The following are some of the trickles that have come through in actual practice.

Very obviously the size and kind of furniture have rather generally been fitted to the size of the child and the kind of program that is carried out. The length of the school day has been varied according to grade level. Adjusting the length of "sitting periods" within the day to the "sitting-age" of the child has been rather generally practiced. Measuring and testing devices are being used more and more as aids in counseling rather than as final evaluations.

### Developing Effective Groups

The McMicken Heights School, one of the Highline Public Schools, which lies immediately outside the southern boundary of the city of Seattle, Washington, has several practices which it follows in trying to develop effective groups within each self-contained classroom.

A very real attempt is made each spring to place the children for the following year in such a way that every room will have a full range of mental abilities, a high, average, and low reading group, and no more than an average range of personality problems. A balance between boys and girls is maintained as nearly as possible and a distribution of "problem" parents is attempted. Peer relations are also considered, for example, if the fact that Mary and Janice are inseparable pals is conducive to their

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individual development, they will be left in the same room; if not, they may be placed in different rooms. A balance of men and women teachers is rather consistently maintained from Grade 4 upward so that it is possible for the child without a father, for example, to be placed with a man teacher. Alternating the children between men and women teachers is considered when feasible. A room that, out of necessity, has two grades, should have fewer children per grade than the so-called "straight" classes and by and large should be freer from personality problems.

The "divided reading program" also has been tried recently in this school. This is a plan by which half the class comes at nine o'clock for skill teaching in reading for one hour. At ten o'clock the other half of the class joins those who are already there, for all other phases of the school program. Those who came at nine o'clock go home at two in the afternoon and the half that came at ten o'clock remains until three for reading skills. The

individual attention that can be given and the relaxed atmosphere that is present have made this arrangement a favored one by teachers and pupils. Two parent evaluations have indicated that they too favor the help that can be given in this program. Tests revealed nine months' growth in reading word recognition during a seven month period, and eleven and one-half months' growth in paragraph reading during the same period of time.

It would be impossible not to mention parent-teacher conferences and their direct relationship to an individualized school program. Broad units of work, accurate records to be used for guidance purposes on all phases of a child's development, multiple-text selections, and special interest groups bear the same close relationship to this individualized program.

Much progress has been made but the real challenge always lies with school people who believe and act in a manner that says, "It can be done."

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in operation is to be found in the high school at East Lansing, Michigan. Racine, Wisconsin, has also evolved a plan whereby the student carries more subjects and consequently has a program which fits his abilities and needs.

These three methods of attempting to improve the total high school curriculum<sup>5</sup> demand some daring in use of buildings

<sup>5</sup> See also G. Robert Koopman's proposal in "A New Theoretical Approach to Secondary School Planning" in *The Nation's Schools*, December 1953; or "The Random Falls Idea" as described by Archibald B. Shaw in *The School Executive* for March 1956.

and time. But those who have dared have produced programs which hold promise.

Other approaches are still in a proposal form and will take even more vision and courage to put into operation.

The individualization of instruction is still an educational frontier. If there were to be made an exhaustive study of present theory and practice, if from this study a new organization of theory were developed, if the new theory were tested on a broad base, and statistics gathered, and if an operational plan were developed and implemented, such a frontier would rapidly disappear.

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