Interage Grouping

As parents and school people together consider new ways of meeting children's needs, a presentation such as this may be of direct benefit.

DURING the past 20 years a number of public and private schools throughout the United States have been experimenting with various ways for grouping young children. One of the most successful of these systems has been the interage grouping. This is a plan of school organization in which an effort is made to provide maximum opportunity to meet the individual needs of all boys and girls, by combining the flexibility of the old country school, the facilities of a modern city school and the know how of present day research.

What Are the Factors?

For the best education in an elementary school the following factors must be considered: (a) The operations of the school must be flexible; (b) There should be a general growing-up process in place of the grade placement system; (c) A child must have a purpose in education; (d) A group should operate in a democratic way; (e) The mental health of children is of prime importance; and (f) A child should be respected as an individual.

1. The operations of the school must be flexible.

The desirable type of experience is qualitative rather than quantitative; therefore, a flexible type of school organization is necessary. The child must be free to explore. His course of action would take him into the community where he would be aided in discovering and in seeking satisfaction for his needs as he grows. The situation may well expand outward for depth of understanding.

With this type of organization there would be no need for definite grades "per se." Grade placement tends to limit the capabilities of a child. A group should be heterogeneous. How good is the system of standardization throughout the school system? Isn't it a commonly accepted opinion that a group of varied backgrounds tends to give a broader outlook to a problem? This type of class is striven for in seminars, in the solution of civic problems, etc.; therefore, would not our elementary classes be enhanced by deemphasizing the unimaginative places where standardization tends to reign?

It is felt by many that fixed grade standards, units that "culminate" and grade groupings that mark education into distinct steps are barriers to continuity in learning.

Children are purposefully selected through results obtained from sociometric tests and objective and subjective evaluation by the teacher of the child's

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social, academic, emotional and physical development.

An interage system is advantageous in placing a child in a group that seems to offer the greatest learning opportunity for him. A healthy class climate is more conducive for children to learn in. This grouping makes the efficient placement of a child more feasible, by allowing more freedom in placing the child in one of several groups. Teachers at the beginning of the year can compose groups with greater learning potentials. Children are gregarious, which makes group integration vital. The oneness of the group tends to increase the quality of the experience for each individual. In finding answers to questions, solving problems or fulfilling a need, the ideas of many, working in a common group, will have far greater effect than the ideas of one individual. Likewise, the greater the quality of cumulated past experiences the group brings together, the greater will be the quality in the thinking.

Interage grouping can help to make possible better balance between the two sexes. Overly hostile and aggressive children can be spread throughout the groups and not concentrated in one class, thus giving them the opportunity for more individual guidance.

2. There should be a general growing-up process of the grade placement system.

Interage grouping tends to stress maximum individual growth and reinforces the fact that a child is growing continuously and does not reach definite levels of attainment at the end of each year. The first schools in this country were ungraded. All the children went to school in one classroom. As our population increased schools became crowded. Grade organization was developed to take care of large numbers of children for mass-teaching. Each classroom became a grade and acquired definite grade standards which all pupils were required to meet during a given year. If a child failed to meet the minimum essentials he was and still is expected to repeat the grade. Recent research studies show that it is better for most students to continue with their group rather than be left back. It is obvious that not all children are able to attain these minimum essentials, and it would not be administratively expedient to hold back these children. It is generally felt by authorities that nonpromotion does not maintain grade school standards, does not appreciably decrease the variables within a grade, is not a good motivation factor, and does not bring about better adjustment.

Youngsters of a given age do not have the same growth patterns or achievement during any “grade.” To say all youngsters are to be promoted so they will continue to grow alike educationally is to disregard the facts.

In an interage group a teacher could be compared to a horticulturist who specializes in the raising of gladiolas. First, he prepares the soil to provide the best growing conditions. He is conscious of the previous handling, dipping and storing of the plants, and of the conditions that are necessary before he can plant them. After he has planted the bulbs, he nurtures the plants through their entire growing season until they have reached their fullest bloom, constantly giving attention to individual plants. Yet he gives them all the same type of care when it is expedient.

The growth and development of a child cannot be forced to fit into arbitrary time intervals. The brain does not grow at the same rate of speed as the
glands of the body nor do these sections of the body grow at a continuous rate of speed. Similarly, a child may not be ready to learn to read when he is ready for numerous other things. Children's first experiences in school should be successful and satisfying. Plans and procedures must recognize all of a child's needs—physical, social, emotional and spiritual, as well as intellectual. Wide differences exist among individuals, which calls for careful planning so that growth may be wholesome and continuous. Child growth is complex and each child has a "pattern" of growth that makes him "different" not only from other children but from other developing patterns of his own growth.

3. A child must have a purpose in education.

Unless there is a purpose to learning the student will not act sincerely, and the learning experience will not have meaning. Each individual has his own growth pattern. Each individual learns in proportion to the learning experience provided, the amount which applies to his own needs. Although the curve of learning will differ from child to child, each child should show achievements according to his ability.

Informal experimentation of the teaching of reading tended to show that children of average intelligence or above can learn to read satisfactorily during their first three years in school, if their needs for this experience are adjusted to their abilities. In an average first-year group probably a third of the children will be ready to learn to read early in the year and will make "normal" progress. Probably another third of the group will need special help in some aspects of reading readiness and will start a little later. They should be making good progress by the end of the year, but will be below the standard of the more "mature" children. The other third of the group may spend half the year or more on experiences designed to build the reading they need and will make only a beginning during the first year. Because of the careful attention to their needs, they will accelerate their speed of learning as they gain in maturity, and may do as well as the more rapid starters by the end of the three-year time span. This parallels what is known about children learning to talk. Some use words very early and are fluent speakers by the time they are three years of age. Others are very slow in developing speech and may be distinctly retarded linguistically at the age of three. When these children enter primary school at the age of six it may be impossible to tell them apart. The slow starters may speak as well and talk as much as those who started earlier. The end result is approximately the same, but the curve of learning has been different. The same may be true of learning to read.

The differences in the capacities of the other skills is equally great. There can be no justification for the practice of assigning the same lessons continuously to all children, regardless of the subject.

The teaching of social studies also presents a challenge to the teacher. Any experience or activity in which children engage requires the participation of groups of pupils on different levels of maturity. All pupils will not be ready to engage in the same type of reference work, written reports or oral discussion. A committee organization is the goal, within which each one can find his place and in which he can be encouraged to make his maximum contribution.

4. A group should operate in a democratic way.

Democracy places its highest value on
people. Our schools must insure freedom of expression, promote creativeness, and develop skills. Emphasis also must be placed on developing sociable human beings who can work and live cooperatively with others, and who understand how to solve their individual and group problems with consideration for all.

Realizing that there may be child-like solutions to these problems, a great deal depends in early childhood upon the teacher, and to a greater degree, the parent. The teacher should have the insight to lead or direct children to be less dependent each year and to assume greater responsibility in proportion to their development and growth.

Children learn democracy by practicing it. As a member of a democratic society, it is one of our duties to respect the rights of all individuals. We should believe that every person who must abide by a decision should have a part in making it. The decision must come from inside the situation and not outside of it. This does not mean that a “laissez faire” atmosphere must prevail. The child must have responsibilities to the group which match his capabilities. He must respect the rights of others when working on a common core.

5. The mental health of children is of prime importance.

It is easier to prevent maladjustment and failure than it is to care for the complex problems which accompany these misfortunes. If children were placed in small interage class groups, it would be appreciably less difficult to study each individual child and adapt the curriculum to his needs.

Good mental health is not achieved merely by the removal of obstacles, but when the “needs” of an individual are met. The organization of an interage group should tend to meet individual needs. It should help in developing a sense of personal worth by providing opportunities for each person to experience the satisfaction of his needs for belonging, achieving success in some activities, developing meaningful personal goals and values. Interage grouping should help to develop good interpersonal relationships through the experiences and satisfactions entailed in cooperatively participating with others. The achievement of group goals and the gradual expansion of the type of groups in which a child finds himself are of inestimable value.

The needs of boys and girls have become more apparent in recent years. A smooth transition from the home atmosphere to that of group living in school has come to be recognized as both reasonable and necessary.

Some children have been put under strong pressure to follow an external, imposed, artificial program so that their own best sequence pattern has been interrupted. Sometimes fear and tension have accompanied the pressure. To blindly learn what someone else has planned leads many individuals to work at less than par. The “passing of time” during any grade only widens the gap that separates children’s achievements in the common learnings.

All children should begin school by coming to think of themselves as productive learners. No child need learn that he has come to the end of learning—that he has easily done all there is to do. No child need learn that he has come to the end of his ability—that it is hopeless for him to try to succeed.

All children have the healthy experience of being able to help others as the basis for planning and guiding in their learning experiences. One aspect of personality growth of any child is different
from the other aspects of personality of
the same child.

A child's readiness for each experience
must be considered. A child working at
a high level will need to be challenged
and provided with rich opportunities.
Another child will work at a slower pace
and will need much help and guidance.
Concern for the individual demands
thoughtful planning as well as a wide
variety of materials, activities and ex-
periences.

In an interage class teachers are free
to help individual children learn in ways
best suited for them. A seven-year-old
who likes to swing with his six-year-
old friend can still read books about
rocket ships with his eight-year-old
friend who has like interests. An eight-
year-old who is lacking in reading skills
but who is able to do difficult arithmetic
problems, need not "stay back" in a
grade with younger children on the basis
of reading.

One of the purposes of the interage
unit is to dispense with rigid plans of
"grading" and promotions of young chil-
dren and establish an educational pro-
gram based upon the natural develop-
ment of each child in his own pattern
of growth.

In an interage group, with its age
span, the children work at different
things in different ways, and no one is
made to feel conspicuously ahead or be-
hind the other. All children have the
healthy experience of being able to help
other children in some things and ac-
cepting help in others. Flexible grouping
and individualized instruction make it
possible for each individual to work up
to his capacity and to progress as rapidly
as is possible for him. Superior children
should be stimulated because there is
no grade average with which they could
become self-satisfied. No ceiling is set on
their learning. They grow according to
their needs regardless of their age. There
is no restraint in growth and the teacher
presents a challenging program equal to
the child's abilities.

It is inevitable that some children will
progress at a slower rate than others. Often children who show a slow learning
pattern in the early primary years make
a sudden spurt at the later primary or
early intermediate level. Other children,
because of the quality of their home en-
vironment, mental ability, emotional and
social development, or because of physi-
cal defects, remain slow learners always.
But in every case each must be helped
to realize his own strengths and limita-
tions and to strive for maximum success
at his own level.

These children should be relieved of
tension producing, growth retarding
grade standards and expectations, thus
making it possible for them to feel com-
fortable with differences in maturity and
ability. The slow learner should not be
placed with less sociable, less mature
children. Neither should he be labeled
as "stupid" or any other such term. In an
interage class he does not "stick out like
a sore thumb" but can be placed in a
group with which he feels at ease. The
attitude of the other children toward
him and what he thinks they think of
him, in many cases, is more of a hurdle
to overcome than the learning of the
specific techniques and skills involved.

The lessening of peer status squab-
bling, stratified subject matter demands,
group norms, and other pressures should
result in a warm, friendly group, free
of tension, made up of students con-
scious of their responsible roles as group
members.

6. A child should be respected as an
individual.

-Respect for a child as an individual
will provide wholesome leadership-followership experiences of unusual number and variety. One of the finest outcomes of this experience is the relationship that can exist between younger and older members of the group. It stimulates cooperative attitudes among children and reduces pressure because of less competition to meet a certain standard. For example, in the family unit, younger members respond to the stimulus of the older members and without undue pressure will want to do things that older ones are doing—both in terms of material they handle and the quality of their performance. The older children, under the guidance of the teacher, find new ways of growing as they assist younger children with their work: they achieve new levels of satisfaction and responsibilities by becoming useful to the group as a whole. This should result in the development of better social integration by the end of the year.

Goal: Continuity of Growth

A master teacher for several years, rather than brief intervals under the care of several teachers, should result in productive learning for the children. Each teacher who conscientiously tries to meet the needs of children, spends considerable time in getting acquainted with a child and learning his needs. Promotion, coming at frequent intervals, tends to disturb the continuity of the child's learning and decreases his effectiveness. Frequent change of teachers undermines a child's security in attacking tasks, since each teacher differs in methods of work and in approach to problems of teaching and learning.

A teacher thoroughly acquainted with the philosophy and the standards of attainment toward which he will point his efforts over a longer span, can plan his work more systematically around the needs of the children under his care. He need not feel pushed for time or held in line by rigid grade requirements. These are his children to guide and help to develop for two or more years.

There is more opportunity for thorough understanding of each child and effective use of that understanding in long range planning for and with the child in an interage unit. A teacher living with a group of children for a period of two or three years also has more opportunity to build rapport with parents and to develop wholesome home and school cooperation. Growth records can be more thorough and reports more meaningful and valuable to parents. Much can be gained by the teacher, by continuing with the group, for he can evaluate his procedures and practices over a longer period and search for better methods.

Children's curriculum experiences can be vital and continuous. Complete records of each child's growth and of parent-school cooperation are a must for maximum development.

An interage primary unit does not in itself guarantee a good educational program. The teacher is still the crux in the implementation of this program, but a teacher, free of inflexible restraints which an interage group offers, should do a better job. The nature of this type of grouping also encourages the teacher to put forth his best effort in meeting the individual needs and abilities of the children.