

Curriculum Research

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Intraclass Grouping Practices in Elementary Classrooms¹

SUPERVISORS, administrators, and classroom teachers have consistently advocated the use of intraclass grouping practices for instructional purposes within elementary classrooms. Research and writing indicate extensive interest and concern in intraclass grouping at the elementary grade level for at least three purposes: (a) It is believed by some that the mental health of pupils is improved as a result of the effective use of intraclass grouping. (b) The effects of the group on the attitudes and achievement of the individual are the second stated purpose for which intraclass grouping is recommended. (c) Some educators advocate intraclass grouping as the means by which teachers deal with individual differences of pupils.

An earlier study at the University of Texas investigated intraclass grouping in six elementary school classrooms.² The current exploratory study was undertaken by the research team to study two questions:

First, *Why do teachers group?* (a) What teaching attitudes and adjustment

factors of teachers are related to grouping in classroom instructional programs? (b) In what manner do the classroom organizational beliefs and supervisory practices of the elementary principal affect the grouping practices employed by teachers in his school? (c) Are there grade level factors which account for the difference in the grouping practices of teachers?

Second, *What are the effects of grouping on pupils?* (a) What is the relative effectiveness of cooperative and competitive groups on the slow and rapid learner? (b) What are the relative merits of individual competition and group competition in pupil motivation? (c) To what extent does the grouping organization affect the self and peer evaluations of classmates?

The Method

In the major portion of our work thus far, we have attempted to describe grouping practices and to relate such practices to teacher, principal, and grade factors. In addition, we have begun to determine the effects of various kinds and conditions of grouping on children through both naturalistic and controlled experiments. Some of the instruments which we are using are briefly described as follows:

¹ Supported by a grant from the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health at The University of Texas, Austin.

² Mary Clare Petty. *Intraclass Grouping in the Elementary School*. Austin: Bureau of Laboratory School, The University of Texas Press, 1953.

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1. Grouping practices—A 30-item instrument developed by the project team. This instrument provides primarily a measure of the amount of grouping rather than the qualitative aspects of grouping. It has been checked for reliability and validity, and further validation studies are planned. One procedure which offers promise is a tape-recorded interview with children on "The things we do in class."

Data on grouping practices from different frames of reference are obtained from teachers and principals. Teachers describe "The way I teach," "The way I would teach under ideal conditions," and "The way I think my principal wants me to teach." The principals respond to the instrument for "The way I would teach under ideal conditions," and then for each teacher "The way I think this teacher teaches."

2. Background, adjustment, and teach-

ing attitudes of teachers—the TMAS, the Cook-Medley Hostility Scale, MTAI, and the F-scale are employed. Various kinds of background data also are collected.

3. Supervisory practices and their effects on grouping are determined as teachers and principals rate the effectiveness of specific practices.

Preliminary Results

Why do teachers group? We have obtained consistently significant correlations between selected adjustment factors and the tendency of teachers to group as measured by our grouping practices inventory. These significant correlations are apparent only when we take into account the school systems and grade levels as variables. When all teachers are considered together, the correlations approximate zero.

These puzzling results appear not to

be related to the major undergraduate work of the teacher, whether or not he prepared originally for elementary education, whether or not he had student teaching prior to his teaching experience; neither are they related to other personal factors of age, marital status, number of children, etc. These findings indicate that adjustment factors play an important part in determining the instructional practices teachers employ in the complex professional setting in which they teach.

Effects of Grouping on Pupils

In our studies we have found that situations which involve group competition tend to enhance the performance of pupils with low achievement and to adversely affect the performance of pupils with high achievement. This result is possibly due to the fact that a slow child gains more than his usual share of status from the performance of others in a group situation than do other children.³

Next Steps

The research team has just started its work on the question of the effects of grouping on how children see themselves and others. Another area in which the team is beginning investigation is the effects of grouping on various indices of mental health of pupils.

If grouping is an effective method of classroom organization, we need more information which will answer questions relative to the kind of grouping which is most effective for particular types of

³ B. N. Phillips and M. V. DeVault. "Evaluation of Research on Cooperation and Competition." *Psychological Reports* 3:289-92, 1957.

—. "The Effect of Children's Status on Their Performance Under Self, Group, and Individual Competition." Paper read at the American Educational Research Association Meeting in Atlantic City, 1959.

educational tasks and for certain learners. What are the merits of grouping in the classroom for the slow learner as compared to the rapid learner? Do all benefit most from the same kind of group structures? Is group cohesiveness an important factor in the formation of groups organized for some kinds of tasks and not for others?

One of the most challenging problems which confronts the research team at the present time is that of trying to explain why different relationships are found between teacher adjustment attitudes and grouping practices in different school systems (and possibly also for different schools and grades within a system). The school system is a sociological unit which exists on three levels: the classroom group, the teacher group, and the administrative-supervisory group.

The importance of studying the interrelationships within and among these three levels as one investigates questions relative to any one level becomes more apparent as our work progresses.

Our results indicate that the effect of a teacher personality type is dependent upon the social climate in which he works with other teachers, the kinds of pupils with whom he works, the supervisory-administrative relationships which are established with him, etc. These variables seem pertinent and must be accounted for before we will be able to find substantial answers to the question, Why do teachers group? If such answers are found, it is thought that solutions will be forthcoming for many of the problems which schools and school people are continuously facing.

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