Some generalizations from research

Grouping: What Have We Learned?

Education is essential not only to individual fulfillment but also to the vitality of our national life. The vigor of our free institutions depends upon educated men and women at every level of the society. Our schools must prepare all young people, whatever their talents, for the serious business of being free men and women.

THAT education is essential to national survival is a question which is no longer being debated. Yet the means to promote a type of education which will insure the vitality of democracy is still an important area of discussion. In the list of currently debated means to accomplish agreed upon ends, the amorphous, protean subject of grouping ranks quite high.

Recent reports by distinguished scholars endorsing use of ability grouping in most subject areas have heightened the concern of serious educators. Certainly these reports have been seized upon as documentary evidence that specific patterns of ability grouping must be pursued if the schools are to be effective in their effort to preserve our society. The practice of widespread use of ability grouping has been resurrected after 25 years of dormancy. Consequently, ability grouping practices are being formulated and adopted by many educators without their consulting the available research as to the effect of these practices on learning.

In analyzing the research findings, it is imperative to recognize that the research must be related to a particular value orientation. This orientation is the preservation and promulgation of the democratic way of life whose major feature is the importance of the opportunity for self development for every individual. The function of research, as far as grouping practices in a democratic society are concerned, is to uncover those practices which are supportive to developing democratic personalities and to expose for what they are those practices which are inimical to democratic processes. Any research approach which willfully ignores this value orientation for some vague referent such as “science,” or to promote greater efficiency in a narrowly defined area of learning, may participate, however unconsciously, in injury to a social order which has promoted the self development of the individual more than any other comparable system in history.

Bruno Bettelheim succinctly maps out this road to destruction in his recent work.
article, "The Ignored Lesson of Anne Frank" (3). In the Gestapo concentration camps as well as in their civil life, many Jewish people of Germany willingly participated in fashioning their self destruction as they suppressed their strong value orientation in cooperating with the Nazis in order that they might for a brief time remain physically comfortable. They divorced means from ends in their immediate lives, removing themselves from the realities of the dreadful consequences of their practices.

As one witnesses the reaction of many educators to basically discriminatory, antidemocratic practices in the school, one wonders whether the same commitment to a comfortable illusion obtained by separating means and ends is not involved in some of the present school practices. It is imperative that the grouping practices which are sanctioned are those which will support the development of democratic behavior and encourage the goals of individual development. This article, then, is concerned with developing some generalizations which are supported by research findings and which will give educators some guidance in the area of grouping. These generalizations are organized under three major headings: (a) Ability grouping and achievement; (b) Grouping and personal and social development; and (c) Areas of needed research.

Ability Grouping and Achievement

Perhaps the most commonly practiced grouping in our schools is ability grouping, sometimes erroneously referred to as homogeneous grouping. This type of grouping customarily places children in a class according to group IQ test scores or some other standardized test score. One of the primary motivations for practicing ability grouping has been the rather generally accepted assumption that children, especially bright children, learn more if they are grouped according to ability and taught separately. But how valid is this assumption? The following five generalizations seem to be supported at the present time by research.

1. Ability grouping in itself does not produce improved achievement in children. Improved achievement seems rather to result from the manipulation of other complex factors; curriculum adaptation, teaching methods, materials, ability of the teacher to relate to children and other subtle variables (1, 7, 14, 25, 26).

2. Contrary to statements in previous summaries of the research on the effects of ability grouping on children's achievement (most of this reported research was done in the 1920's) (22, 23, 24), more recent research evidence seems to indicate that ability grouping actually may be detrimental to children in the average and lower ability groups (13). These children appear to suffer from the deprivation of intellectual stimulation when brighter children are removed from the class. Conversely the brighter children did not appear to suffer when left with the average and lower ability students, at least through the elementary school (13).

3. Ability grouping at an early age seems to favor unduly the placement of children from the higher socioeconomic class in higher ability groups. These children do not necessarily benefit, at least in elementary and beginning junior high school, from the increased academic diet (4, 12, 13).

4. Research evidence in the area is quite meager, but what is available does
not support the prevalent assumption that college achievement is improved by ability grouping in the high school. Rather, improved achievement in colleges as the result of high school training is a function of other complex factors than ability grouping (1).

5. Ability grouping as an organizational structure may accentuate the attainment of goals and symbols for goals of narrow academic achievement to the extent that other broader desirable behavioral goals and objectives are attenuated and jeopardized. The organizational structure of ability grouping may promote group norms which are antithetical to norms that foster societal cohesion and individual societal responsibility (17, 25).

Grouping and Personal and Social Development

A second broad problem which has been a cause for major concern among thoughtful educators with the advent of ability grouping as a major instructional procedure in recent years is the influence that ability grouping may have on the student’s personal and social development. The question stated in its most direct form is, “Does ability grouping militate against personal development (especially development of a healthy self concept) and social development of children?” Research findings on ability grouping as it relates to personal and social development of students would appear to support these important generalizations:

1. The evidence is fairly conclusive that grouping practices in a school can assist in developing social situations that influence the student’s perception of self, his sense of dignity and worth, and his attitudes toward other children. In view of this, grouping practices should be concerned with furthering the establishment of social climates that will encourage the intellectual, social and personal development of every child without detrimental effects on individual children (17, 19).

2. Grouping practices are significant factors in establishing a teaching-learning situation whereby children can acquire the general education skills and abilities needed by all citizens in a democratic society (21). This means, in brief, that students need opportunities to work in common purpose with a wide range of individuals. Grouping practices which separate students on the basis of ability as determined by group IQ or standardized tests reduce the likelihood that students will be exposed to a broader range of ethnic and cultural differences in the society (12, 28).

3. Pressures to institute certain grouping practices in our schools represent pervasive social problems in our culture. Educators need to be doubly alert that the schools are not utilizing grouping practices which assist in maintaining and promoting social and racial biases which militate against the general education objectives, equal educational opportunity and the development of each person as an individual (4, 28).

4. The solutions to the broad problems of learning are probably not to be realized in some scheme of ability grouping. The key to what happens in any instructional group is probably the classroom teacher (11, 26). Grouping can assist a teacher in attainment of desirable general and special education ob-

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jectives, but grouping practices are in no sense a substitute for teacher competence (27).

Areas of Needed Research

1. There are certainly some differences in the problems of grouping as they are encountered in the elementary and the secondary school. As the students progress, research shows that the range of differences widens. This broader range of differences in the secondary school will surely necessitate different practices in grouping. Consequently, a major issue in the secondary school curriculum is how to maintain groups which structurally provide the opportunity to promote general education objectives and also develop groups which will give attention to the encouragement and development of special interests. Both areas need attention in our concern for strengthening our society.

2. The second problem concerns the relation of grouping practices to that vast number of children who because of their underprivileged environment have been called disadvantaged (5). Can the school develop educational programs that will assist these children in developing competencies and, at the same time, avoid practices which segregate and even prompt their early elimination from school? There is some evidence that cultural deprivation begins to exact its toll at an early age. At the age of three the unfavorable influences already begin to weigh heavily upon the child (9). Therefore, it has been suggested that these culturally disadvantaged children be started to school two years earlier in order to compensate for the intellectual impoverishment they suffer.

3. A third problem which lies at the very heart of the instructional process, and one which will take considerable professional courage on the part of many educators to face, is a need for an exploration of the reasons for the popularity of ability grouping among our teachers and administrators. Ability grouping in elementary schools especially is woefully inadequate in reducing to any great extent academic differences of more than one variable. Yet, despite this evidence, a large segment of the profession seems at present to be firmly committed to the practice of ability grouping (6, 8).

One anthropologist has suggested that some teachers unconsciously project their own psychological needs into the classroom and, therefore, favor groups of children who give them need satisfaction (10). These teachers receive need satisfaction from children who have learned to be sensitive to adults' psychological needs and are responsive and eager to fulfill these demands by their classroom action. This would mean that teachers who are motivated by this particular psychological needs system would select children who are sensitive, docile and compliant, and would reject those children who are resentful, rebellious, unable or reluctant to relate to a teacher's need demands. Tacit admission of this situation is seen in the common administrative practice of giving a teacher a "fast" group the next year if he or she will take a "slow" group for a year. Generally, the "fast" groups are made up of those children with whom teachers are happy (receive need satisfaction from) to work. Are grouping practices serving some underlying motivations rather than concern for students' learning? This may be one of the more fruitful hypotheses to explore in trying to understand an uncritical acceptance of
ability grouping practices based at best on specious measures of abilities.

4. A fourth problem on which more research is needed is in the area of creativity. Recent researchers in these areas are raising questions as to whether our present grouping procedures do not actually discriminate against creative children in favor of their docile and/or conforming peers. At this time our measurements in the areas of IQ and academic achievement do not correlate highly with measures of creativity, and in our desperate search for talent our schools may be overlooking the talent most urgently needed, the creative individual (8, 18). With the advent of the technological developments many of the technical, specific skills which we seek to develop in our schools may be obsolete as computers take over these processes and a higher premium will be placed on those who can creatively design and program problems for the machines (16). The big question in this area is, how can the school discover and foster this talent? Ability grouping, at this time, definitely does not seem to be of assistance in the solution of this problem.

5. The last area, but one of the most promising for new information on the development of human personality through structuring social organizations, is the current research movement which is examining the complex dynamics involved in the interaction of human personalities and social organizations. This movement has been characterized by the use of elaborate theoretical conceptual systems which serve as frameworks to organize the multitude of variables involved in the process of interaction. While education has been slow in researching this area, industrial psychology has explored this field in greater depth (2, 15). However, a recent publication of the National Society for the Study of Education, The Dynamics of Instructional Groups, uses some of these new concepts in analyzing the sociopsychological characteristics of instructional groups (20). This research may very well change our conceptions of what constitutes a good instructional group. Educators need to follow carefully these efforts and also, with their own research, to support investigations in this area.

There is undeniably a great need for more and better research in every area of grouping. Unfortunately many of the current "studies" reported are not predicated on any acceptable research design and in fact seem to be directed to supporting preconceived conclusions. Thus, it would seem that the research design must take into account such factors as: learning in its broadest sense, longitudinal achievement data, pupils' attitudes and values, the influence of group interaction, and differences in teachers' classroom performance, to name but a few.

Nevertheless, the author believes that the generalizations which have been reported in this paper have been established by research in education and in the allied social sciences. He also believes that these generalizations can give us guides to action, increase our objectivity, and buttress our courage to pursue desirable educational goals in the face of public pressures which often urge the schools to subscribe to fads. If educators choose to pursue policies and practices which ignore these researches and to promote a value system antithetical to the democratic value pattern, as was pointed out in the first part of the paper, this is done at great risk to our future. Here rests the challenge that these re-
search data hold for our educational practices in grouping today.

References


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