Grouping Is the Function and Process of Content

Teachers must organize so as to teach specific elements.

THERE is, according to Wilton Krogman, no such thing as an average child. And he is not alone in that judgment. How, then, can grouping based on any kind of average measure, be it physical, mental, emotional or what have you, be justified?

I do not think it can. Yet certainly we do need to group in our classrooms. Purposes of (a) teaching and learning efficiency, (b) need for collective action, (c) for gregarious or friendship feelings must be served. Yet if no kind of average measure can be used, what other measures are possible? There is one that I know about and, very simply, it is that teachers must group to teach single particulars, using such as bases for classroom organization.

Such grouping on a single particular can come only after an initial, exploratory teaching act which, en masse or individually, enables the teacher to identify specific items or elements common to two or more children. These single items, these isolated "particulars," then, become the "lesson plan" for those particular children, and no others.

The problem, it seems to me, for teacher preparation and supervision is to help teachers learn how to identify and act upon those single elements in order to teach specific children what they need to know exactly when they need to know it.

Some would say that achievement tests could serve to highlight particulars upon which a teacher might group a class. However, Celia Stendler, in the current yearbook of the Department of Elementary School Principals ¹ says flatly:

The practice of putting enough faith in results of standardized tests . . . to justify their use for placement purposes . . . is extremely questionable.

I, too, would question any test for such use. Especially would I question published tests because they aim at average ness and so are not applicable in a given classroom for specific teaching plans. No test maker can know a given group, and any amount of standardization simply misses this point, whatever other values such instruments might have.

For example, what reading-readiness tests, what reading tests, what I. Q. tests

are specific enough to help a teacher to know exactly what to work on with which children on the following school day? Testing experts freely state that such measurements are exceedingly gross at best, and plead with all users to “Follow the directions carefully.” In short, it is my opinion that published tests are useless for continual—and continuing—daily teaching operations. Of course, they do have other purposes. But that is for another paper.

Grouping, I believe, must be a function and process of content, curriculum, and of its learning. By this I mean: if the content is narrow, the grouping range is narrow; if content is wide and varied, then grouping range can be wide and varied.

For example, if a text is at a readability level of 4.5, then, for efficiency’s sake, every member of the class reading that text should read at the level of 4.5. This is patently ridiculous, because all reading achievement tests measure such a complexity of reading performance that to assign a 4.5 pupil to a 4.5 text still does not guarantee a practical, workable homogeneity.

What does guarantee a practical, workable homogeneity? I repeat that grouping must come after particulars are isolated in a preliminary, initiative kind of teaching action.

Studies on grouping presently available—and they are numerous—show that the way children are grouped has little significant effect. It is what the teacher is and does that makes a difference.

However, there is no study, to my knowledge, that includes measurement of the kind of grouping I am discussing here. We need such studies. One must turn to non-classroom centered practices, which are not researched, to my knowledge, but are highly relevant to my point. For example, coaches of all team sports isolate players upon specific needs, such as perfecting the ability to bunt in baseball, to catch fly balls, to hit grounders; or such as learning to wipe water off one’s face in swimming before one can learn to hold one’s breath under water when learning to swim; such as perfecting the ability to kick field goals in football, or pass accurately.

The manuals of the American Red Cross, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, and other youth serving agencies are full of suggestions of grouping upon specific needs. These needs are usually tangible, recognizable, and almost immediately attainable. These practices are useful, efficient and practical. Yet educators have spent decades in working on “fluid” and “flexible” grouping without coming to grips with the central problem: Do you, or do you not, in school instruction, group children when they do not know the specific reason for which they were put together? I think not. Let me turn to daily classroom practice to illustrate this.

**Beginning Reading**

The first day of school in the first grade, the teacher will help the children to paint, draw, play with blocks, institute necessary routines, and above all, talk. The teacher sizes up the children and, without a need for reference to any published reading readiness material—notice various abilities. Some children talk a blue streak. The teacher finds them, calls them by name, forms them in a circle and moves them along the first step towards reading by writing down what they say on the easel or blackboard. The teacher notices that other children are frightened and overwhelmed by the new situation. “Come with me,”
she says, calling them *by name* and helping *them* to express *themselves*, probably not by *talking* so much as by drawing, or painting or some such. Thus these children form another group, and the next day can be called by the teacher to tell about *their* pictures, which can then be labeled, and added to the developing sight vocabulary of those children.

The teacher knows that the child who cannot enjoy two-way communication is the child who cannot read, so the groups are formed—different ones each day—to further and improve this learned behavior. Shy children whose communicative spirits are dampened by the loud and boisterous are grouped together and helped to talk, or perhaps to draw or maybe to sing. The teacher keeps up incentive by saying something like, "Tell me about your picture, so I can put your words down on it," or "When you say something, I can write it—and you can see how what you said looks in words."

The slow talkers are grouped on the basis of needing practice in talking, no matter what other characteristics they have. As the weeks roll by, the teacher can easily spot those children who are bursting with signals of readiness to read by their delighted, "Hey, that word starts like my name!" Then these children may be worked into a group, and later, perhaps, be scheduled for individual conferences with their teacher for more detailed reading instruction. As children develop more and more independent reading ability, and as their individual conferences reveal common needs in skills, or common interest in the same book or story, the teacher can plan more and more groups.

An infinite number of ways to work together, with or without teacher instruction, is possible. In such grouping, *it does not matter* if the children differ widely in intelligence, in cultural backgrounds, in achievement or in anything else. What does matter is that there be one single purpose binding the group together for the duration of that purpose. There is no guess work on the part of the teacher as to which child should be assigned to which group. For example, he knows for certain that John, Bill, Mary, Suzy and Joe all need help on the consonant digraphs, *ph, th, sh*, and *ch*. So the teacher plans for that group, sets the time, then teaches that needed skill. Rather than scatter knowledge to the whole class, hoping it will fall on fertile ground but not knowing where it needs to take root, teachers find specific reasons for group organization. As with the baseball coach, certain things are needed. In reading, these are isolated or revealed through some kind of an individual conference or other teaching act, as has been described.

In beginning this article, I referred to the need for an "initial, exploratory teaching act, which, en masse or individually, enables the teacher to isolate specific items or elements common to two or more children." Let us examine the preceding classroom example for such initial actions.

1. The teacher helped the children to paint, draw, etc., and in so doing noted the children who were voluble, those who were quiet or shy, etc. The exploratory teaching act of getting children busy was all this teacher needed to group on such single bases.

2. As the weeks rolled by, the teacher picked up the signals from children whose maturation enabled their hearing to assist the eye in seeing parts of words, e.g., be-

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1 See the column, "Talks with Teachers," by Alice Kelihir, in *Grade Teacher*, November 1960, on this point.
gning consonants, thus affording other specific bases for making a group on these most necessary basic skills.

3. As general independent reading ability developed throughout the year, common needs, skills and purposes revealed themselves. These are exploratory actions which provide the teacher all the information necessary to group continually, day in and day out, without any need to refer to tests for his daily planning. This is not to say that I would not advise a year-beginning testing program with the best standardized achievement tests available.

Written Language

How would such grouping work in the area of written language? Not many teachers do group in this area of the curriculum, and those who do reap rewards of greatly improved writing and improved attitudes toward writing. In short, the love of writing is enhanced. How does it work?

First of all, the pupils write for reasons that they consider important—letters to a sick friend, or to request free material from some business concern, or to invite someone to come and see them—not to learn what a good beginning sentence is, not to learn how to paragraph properly. These are skills that later come through individual conferences with the teacher, or when, for reasons of efficiency, through group conferences. The writing comes before the grouping, not after.

All good writing starts with a good idea. If the idea is no good, the writing is no good. And the ideas come from within the writer, even though his train of thought may be set in motion by the teacher.

Let us say that a certain teacher is successful in interesting his pupils about writing on a certain day. The children write enthusiastically. They have something to say. The teacher facilitates the writing. He says something like, “I wonder what things you need to know to be good writers that I could teach you?” Some children are eager. Most children, I believe, want help once they can ask for it without embarrassment. The letters, etc., are given to the teacher for mailing and looking over. Without grading or even marking the papers, the teacher goes through them one by one, sees what is needed, and makes notes. Perhaps several children need help in using the rule involving long vowels. Others are at sea in the use of quotation marks. Others are dull as dishwater with repetitive ideas from one writing time to the next. The teacher makes a record of all this, and plans accordingly, approximately within a week, to make certain that the indicated groups are met, and their deficiencies corrected.

When such single items are isolated for teaching, it rarely takes more than five or ten minutes to do it. In each case the child knows the reason for the existence of the group—and accepts it as reasonable. The child does not think “I am a dumbbell,” but rather “I need to learn how to use quotation marks for my next letter.” The motivation for such learning is enormous and generates more and more will to learn. It is exciting to work on a skill when you know how important it is to you.

The element of pupil self-choice is an underlying thread throughout this discussion. Grouping, as I have tried to present it, brings into focus the ways in which teachers can show children their specific disability without feelings of inferiority. When a pupil knows what he needs to know, the psychological effect is that of stimulation and challenge, not inferiority.