

Grouping: Research Offers Leads

*We must find the unique
individual without submerging
him in a type.*

IF, in education today, there is a less comfortable topic to write about, we do not know what it is. A host of lay citizens, academicians in general, and many teachers and administrators—including excellent ones—put tremendous faith in grouping as the way out. The common-sense view scarcely pauses to question that the thing to do is to separate the able, the average, and the less able. It assumes that this can be done accurately and easily. And it simply does not doubt that the ablest group, thus “set free,” will rise to unprecedented heights. Interest is keen.¹ The grouping movement, which boomed in the Twenties and early Thirties and dwindled in the next decade, has risen strikingly again, so that samplings show a high proportion of schools grouping extensively or planning to.

In the face of all this bright hopefulness, the reporter's role is a sorry one. For he has to report that, by and large, the research evidence is disappointing.

Since so much of the area is foggy and uncertain, maybe the best place to start is with the one thing we know most about: the simple A, B, C sectioning of

elementary grades and secondary courses. Detroit started this around 1921, and hundreds of schools followed suit. This was just after the Army's impressive World War I use of classification testing had given the testing movement an exciting impetus. The fascinating new concepts of I.Q. and M.A. seemed to offer a handy norm for each child, to predict what he should do in reading, arithmetic, or whatever—a ready-made device for classifying.

That first fine faith in the I.Q. soon dwindled. Yet other measures kept coming along, measures of achievement, of special aptitudes, etc. There was still faith that some classifying index based on just the right combination of measures could be found. As time went on the base was broadened. Reading scores were often weighted heavily. Previous grades and attitudes and work habits were considered, and teachers' judgments got added attention. It has been a long and ingenious search for the best ways of classifying pupils into “homogeneous” groups.

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¹In the three years following June 1950, *Education Index* listed 25 articles; in the three years ending in June 1960, it listed 115.

What Are the Findings?

From the beginning the movement encountered disagreement, even violent opposition. Much of the great volume of publication was philosophical and speculative, or mere opinion. But there were also hundreds of quantified studies, many of them crude, but some refined and methodical. Nearly always they used pre- and post-measures of subject-matter gain to compare "homogeneous" and "heterogeneous" situations. "

The evidence has varied. Its mass is so enormous that evaluation is difficult. Reviewing the accumulated findings, various investigators have come to slightly differing positions. Our own interpretation is that the data will support these conclusions:

1. There is no evidence that ability grouping, taken by itself, leads to improved mastery of subject matter.
2. Even if we take the most favorable position, which some investigators hold, that there is a slight balance of evidence in favor of ability grouping, the difference is minuscule and bears no relation whatever to the optimistic popular expectation of a signal change.
3. Again, even if we posit the greatest advantage from grouping that the data could possibly support, that advantage has rarely gone to the ablest group, on whose behalf the current movement is largely sponsored. The anticipated sharp rise of the high group as soon as it was "set free" has generally failed to appear.
4. If any one group has at all consistently gained from grouping it has been the low group. There is also substantial evidence that special programs for the mentally retarded are beneficial.
5. Teachers have tended to see grouping as somewhat easing their problems

of instruction—a perception not to be taken lightly.

Another line of investigation entered in. The search had been for "homogeneity," and it was the narrowing of range which the teachers especially desired; to what extent was it actually being achieved? Here the results were so disillusioning that they have rarely been accepted by any but the sophisticated. One investigator after another has uncovered roughly the same facts: Suppose we take a total population of children at any grade level; record for each not only his I.Q. and M.A. but also data on, say, eight or ten other variables—reading speed and comprehension, arithmetic reasoning and computation, and so on. Now divide these children into three levels *by any criterion or combination index you care to choose* (which can be done "on paper," without actually moving children). How much will you reduce the total variability within each group? by two thirds? by half? No, you will be lucky if you reduce it by one-fifth. The layman and the unsophisticated teacher may—and do—continue to think of each subgroup as "homogeneous"; the expert knows it is still rampantly heterogeneous, concealing tremendous ranges on all but the one variable chosen as the basis for division.

Cook may have revealed the reason why this is inevitably true when he showed that any child is likely to vary about four-fifths as widely among his own traits as the group he is in will spread over any one variable. The group cannot be homogeneous because the individuals in it are not "homogeneous" within themselves.

We believe the evidence on this line is solid enough to back up these conclusions:

1. The supposed homogeneity of the

subgroups is a myth, even though the ranges of differences have been reduced somewhat. (This does not apply at all equally to groupings *by subjects*, though it offers a warning even there.)

2. The myth can be a dangerous one, leading teachers to impose a stereotype upon a group and, by teaching to an assumed *type*, make *less* provision for the unique individuals than they would in classes they knew to be heterogeneous.

Well, here we are with two discouraging but undeniable findings about old-style A, B, C grouping:

1. It does not produce anywhere nearly the hoped-for homogeneity.

2. All theoretical arguments aside, it does not produce more than microscopic improvements, if those, in subject-matter mastery.

There Are Some Leads

Where shall we turn, then? We cannot just be "against grouping." Schools have to divide up their students in *some* rational way, and we are duty-bound to keep searching for ways that yield the best results. Successful or not, ability grouping tackled some real problems—problems that haunt every honest teacher who tries to fit instruction to each child, in groups that range across enormous diversity. Those problems have not gone away. What shall we do about them?

There are some "leads"—not *proved* perhaps, but enough for a sense of direction. They point toward moving past preoccupation with *types*, to go straight to the unique individual. To do it, they indicate jettisoning closed, rigid, formal stratifications and narrow subdivisions of people or subject matter, in favor of open, "roomy" arrangements with a premium on flexibility.

In view of the popular pressure, the key question may be whether we can stimulate the fullest development of the high-ability students—who are so precious a resource that they simply must be developed—without special sectioning. We believe we can. We have already shown that they tend not to profit from typical ability grouping. The better statement may be that, given reasonable opportunity, they do very well in a wide variety of situations. Abramson is following 192 of them through college. They are from four New York City high schools: one with no ability grouping, two with various grouping and honors plans, one a famous school which admits only the very able. Reporting on their college-sophomore performance, Abramson found "no significant differences." Their own ability level, not the programs they came from, was determining how well they did.

As England and Sweden are moving from highly stratified schools to a more comprehensive model, alert scholars are assessing results. They report that the most able group has a rare ability to "land on its feet" about equally well in all situations. It is the middle and especially the lower groups that show real differences.

Revealingly, these scholars focus little attention on innate ability. The old stratifications were largely on socioeconomic lines. The higher-status children do better, regardless of situation, because of a richer self-concept, superior goals, and a higher vision of what is good and possible. The learning of the lower-class children is crippled more by lacks in these areas than by lack of brains.

In America, too, ability-group lines have been shown to run very close to socioeconomic class lines. Efforts like New York City's "Higher Horizons" proj-

ect are trying to strike directly at the damages of cultural deprivation. Bettelheim protests that at the very moment when we are wiping out "white-color" segregation, we may be erecting a new "white-collar" segregation. He studied one special school for the gifted and concluded that the high-pressure forcing left these able children dependent on the teacher, without time for reflection, and indisposed to use their own critical judgment. Studying these children after they were shifted to unsegregated public schools, he felt they had more freedom for reflection and responded with greater spontaneity and creativity. His studied perceptions parallel a growing swell of worried comments from the field about motivation problems, etc., in some high-pressure programs for the most able.

The Unique Individual

All in all, it appears that we can meet this special problem in a superior way, without rigid grouping, *if we develop to the maximum our schools' resources for flexibly serving the individual*. Let's look at the resources we have.

A skilled, sensitive elementary teacher moves very close to each child. In reading and arithmetic he may have what amounts to small ability groupings, fairly stable yet flexible enough for interchange, the two clusterings differing somewhat because each is based on needs in its own area. After pupil-teacher planning in comprehensive social studies units, he develops differentiated tasks for committees in which diversity is often more to the purpose than homogeneity. In free reading and recreational activities, informal groups cluster about shared interests or friendship. All these subtly shifting groups bring each child into high visibility, to be worked with on his

own terms. There is no flat stratification, no child always the star, no child forever derogated to himself; yet differences in ability and need are faced frankly, though gracefully, studied, and perceptively served.

Similarly, in a good high school, youngsters are helped to size themselves up, get acquainted with various possibilities, and choose what seems best for them. With perceptive guidance, some commit themselves to the rigorous sciences, mathematics, languages, and so on. Others realistically choose a milder climate, and instruction appropriate to their life style. Ways are left open for later changes. Well handled, this is the cornerstone of the comprehensive high school. Even if there is no ability sectioning at all, it already provides the framework for a noteworthy differentiation to meet diverse needs.

Now, how can we build upon the good resources these schools already offer? Anderson and Goodlad say a nongraded elementary school keeps things more open and more flexible to fit each child. Quite a few schools are trying it, or at least a nongraded primary. Some reading specialists are experimenting with individual reading programs. Team teaching is being explored. Guidance is gaining emphasis, with psychological assistance and refined diagnostic aids to help reveal special abilities or needs—and do it early.

High schools are making dramatic changes. Conant and others are pushing the expansion of individual diagnosis and guidance. Elaborate team teaching plans are being coupled with combinations of large- and small-group instruction. Social studies teachers and others are swinging from day-by-day lessons to comprehensive units, gaining time for

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group of "rapid learners" in grades 11 and 12. The fourth is an experimental study of achievement of paired groups involved in two methods of grouping for committee work. The fifth study deals with an experiment in the teaching of reading in the fourth grade. Each case study has content which is of special interest, but each is more important for its research methods, examples of records kept, interviews, tables, and steps taken for controlled experiments in the conduct of the study.

In the appendices the author speaks directly to the administrator concerning his role in educational research. He dis-

cusses the value and the characteristics of a qualified consultant.

This book meets the in-service need of teachers who should be conducting action research. In summary, the author states that educational research should be a natural and rewarding concomitant to successful classroom teaching. This book, one in the Putnam Series in Education, deserves the attention of all interested in vitalizing the "what" and "how" of teaching through active research at the classroom level.

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pupil-teacher planning and the development of differentiated approaches within a class. Block-time scheduling and core programs make this even more effective, as a teacher gets to know a group intimately. Ingenious schedules are being fashioned, to give more chance for enrichment and exploration. The NASSP's Commission on Staff Utilization is pushing the frontiers with respect to independent study, directly adapted to the individual; it is working toward a goal of 40 percent of a youngster's time to be so spent.

Technological Aids

Backing all these efforts are the burgeoning technological aids and physical plant inventions. In foreign language instruction, elaborate tape-recording systems make the new audio-lingual meth-

ods easy to use. Table-size projection equipment is available for individuals and small groups. Programmed instruction *via* scrambled book or teaching machine is increasingly able to offer specific work needed by individuals. Instructional materials in a bewildering wealth make differentiation easier. The whole conceptualization and design of school plant is in ferment, with a tremendous array of individual study cubicles and resources laboratories, and a general flexibility that makes adaptation to peculiar needs steadily easier.

Just where all this will go no one can possibly say until much bold and visionary experimentation is behind us. But the prospect is thrilling. The old, formal stratification and compartmentalization have not paid off. It is time to invest daringly in opening up the system, to exploit the possibilities that invention provides, and to go direct to the unique individual without first submerging him in a type.

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