

Learning Groups Are Seldom Seen: A Project Report

M. Vere DeVault and Dan Andersen

MANY factors contribute to the extent to which an individual learns in a given situation. The way the learner feels about himself, his attitudes toward his peers, or his general disposition at a particular time are recognized as factors which affect learning of individuals in a group or class. Subgroups within classes are thereby formed and represent learning groups the teacher seldom sees.

Traditionally the teacher's concern has been not so much with learning groups as with teaching groups. Our schools are organized on an age level basis because of beliefs about the "teachability" of children in such groups. Schools are sometimes organized into classroom groups on the basis of intelligence quotient scores or on the basis of achievement data. It has been repeatedly suggested that such grouping makes teaching easier and more efficient for the teacher. Within the classroom, teachers search for methods of homogeneously grouping their children so as to make the class more teachable. Homogeneous in what sense? Homogeneous in almost any regard for which scores or data are available!

Research, too, has focused primarily on teacher behavior rather than on the learner. It seems logical that our attention should turn from teacher behavior

and teaching groups to learner behavior and learning groups. Is learner behavior as consistent as teacher behavior? How is individual learner behavior related to the establishment of learning groups? How can teachers influence learner behavior and the establishment of appropriate learning groups? Good teachers have consciously or unconsciously recognized and reacted to learners in various groups even within their teaching group kinds of organization. Such a teacher is one who recognizes that a brusque response to one child turns him inward or into tears whereas the brusque response to a second child sharpens his wit and provides the challenge needed to bring forth his best.

A Study of Learning Groups

If these seldom seen learning groups do exist, what can be done to identify them for the individual teacher, and how can we learn more about these groups and how they function in a classroom?

The Teacher Education Research Project under the direction of the elementary education faculty at the University of Wisconsin is investigating problems of this type. Financed cooperatively by the University and the National Institute of Mental Health, this project has used as

subjects all elementary education students entering the professional preparation program at the beginning of the junior year in two consecutive years. The original proposal was designed to seek answers to questions about mental health as it is related to various teacher preparation programs and the teacher's influence on good mental health of pupils in the classroom.

The two groups of subjects were juniors in the Fall semesters of 1960 and 1961, respectively. Their first year of full-time teaching takes place in the 1962-63 and 1963-64 school years. During the past year data were collected in 38 classrooms ranging geographically from Los Angeles to Boston. Data were collected in classrooms three times during the school year. Instruments in use include a two-hour tape recorded classroom teaching session of the beginning teacher, interviews with the teacher, personality measures of the teacher, and a series of instruments with which the teacher reacts to the individual pupils in his classroom. More pertinent to the matter of this report are the pupil instruments which include some personality testing, their perceptions of self and ideal self, their perceptions of their teacher and their ideal teacher, their perceptions of their peers, and their perceptions of school. Sociometric measures are also obtained.

Since the collection of the final round of data in May of 1963, scoring and processing for computer analyses have occupied a major portion of staff time. Nonetheless, some analyses which are under way make it possible for us to write about a few findings. These findings are such that our attention has been drawn increasingly to the learning groups that are seldom seen.

One problem that this study has dealt

with is an investigation of the communication behavior of the teacher. Since communication interaction is vital to the maintenance of learning, it was felt that it might be well to investigate how children perceive this communication pattern of the teacher, and to explore possible implications this might have for grouping in the classroom. In asking children to respond to items about the communication behavior of their teachers, it became evident when analyzing their responses that children responded differently about what type of communication they desired from their teacher as well as how this related to their attitudes about the affective and cognitive factors of the classroom experience. For example, there were children who wanted a more "directive" teacher—"gave them many facts"—"asked lots of questions"; and when relating this type of teacher communication to school attitudes they indicated it was "fun to learn the things we study in school" and "I am glad to be in this class." Our analysis of this perception data also gave us profiles that differed from this. Not all children wanted the "directive" teacher, and thus our findings here might well indicate that a teacher should be aware of the dimensional aspects of this communicative behavior in forming different instructional groups.

It would appear that if a positive attitude toward learning is desired, the teacher could use appropriate instruments to survey his class and provide a variation in communication behavior that would make for more effective learning in the groups which are established.

This research has reinforced the sex differential that is operative in the elementary classroom. Traditionally the way this differential has been treated is to manipulate the quantity and not the

nature of the learning experience. The boys usually have the same classroom opportunities as the girls, but the teacher often arranges that the boys have these opportunities later. Note the large proportion of boys in the slow reading group and girls in the fast reading group in most primary classrooms.

In our study several sex differences may be reported. Boys perceived teachers as more directive than did girls; girls, on the other hand, perceived teachers as more "relatable" and more academically oriented. Boys were seen by their peers as more aggressive than girls. They did not, however, see themselves as more aggressive than girls reported themselves. These differences in self-perceptions and in peers' perceptions might indicate that boys reported themselves in terms of the cultural role that they have learned is expected of themselves as boys. Therefore their self-perceptions were oriented to their ideas of what boys should be.

When pupils were describing their classmates, including both boys and girls, however, they made judgments on a comparative basis for the total class population. This would indicate that boys see their expected role as more aggressive than girls perceive their role to be. These findings seem to indicate that learning experiences might well be varied for the two sexes. This would argue that there are times when the teacher would work with a "boys' group" and again with a "girls' group." This becomes automatic in a physical education program—why not in a regular classroom? Are there not times when grouping by sex would make it easier for the teacher to meet the expectations of both sexes and thus enhance the learning experiences for both groups? Our evidence would seem to suggest "yes."

Average achievers had the most positive attitudes about the learning process, while high and low achievers had scores closely alike. Though the traditional classroom arrangement has been to group children according to achievement, and with some merit, it was interesting to note that when achievement was related to school attitudes the findings indicated that average achievers actually had the most positive attitudes toward the learning situation while high and low achievers had scores closely alike. It would appear that this is simply further evidence that the classroom presentation is directed to the average student. One may argue from this that again the fast or the slow student is the one who regularly suffers from achievement grouping. As to implication, for those dedicated to ability grouping, this conveys the notion that the extremes are still being denied; to those who are searching for an improved method of working with children, it might well argue that a dimension other than achievement might be more productive. If these seldom seen learning groups do exist, what can be done to identify them for the individual teacher, and how can we learn more about these groups and how they function in the classroom?

After completion of the current project, it is anticipated that research undertaken in the Teacher Education Research Project will focus attention on feedback to the teacher of children's perceptions of various aspects of their environment. Gage, Runkel, and Chatterjee¹ noted changes in teachers' behaviors as perceived by pupils after a single instance

¹ N. L. Gage, P. J. Runkel, and B. B. Chatterjee. *Equilibrium Theory and Behavior Change: An Experiment in Feedback from Pupils to Teachers*. Urbana, Illinois: Bureau of Educational Research, University of Illinois, 1960. (Mimeographed.)

of feedback and after periods ranging from one to two months. The staff of the Wisconsin project now anticipates four instances of feedback over a period of an entire school year. Likewise, it is anticipated that rather than postal distribution of feedback we will have representatives of Wisconsin State Departments of Education, Health, and Welfare assisting with the training of local school supervisory personnel with the counseling of teachers. A nondirective counseling approach is planned so that teachers individually determine the extent and direction of the changes which they strive to achieve.

In addition to determining the effectiveness of feedback in improving the teacher's understanding of the seldom seen learning groups in his class and in his behavior over a period of two years, a number of other questions will be asked. The most fundamental query is the extent to which congruence between the child's ideal teacher and his perceptions of his actual teacher affects other pupils' variables. Is learning increased when this congruence is greatest? Are self concepts, perceptions of peers, or attitudes toward school improved as the child perceives his teacher as increasingly congruent with his ideal? These and other questions are relevant to the kinds of groups a teacher meets with each day he enters the classroom. A better understanding of the structure of these groups and of their effects on the achievement and social adjustment is needed. Hopefully this research will bring to light significant information concerning those learning groups which are present but seldom seen.

—M. VERE DEVAULT, *Professor of Education, and DAN ANDERSEN, Assistant Professor of Education, University of Wisconsin, Madison.*

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