

Developing and Using Classroom Groups

RECENT concern about grouping is reflected in numerous experiments. Schools are reorganizing traditional grade-level grouping and teachers are exploring new ways of differentiating instruction by classroom grouping. From the reports of these instructional innovations and the bases of professional experience, we draw some ideas on classroom grouping for effective instruction.

Group Size and the Nature of Groups

Tucked away in a twelve-year old book is a mathematical formula that gives us clues about grouping procedures. Bossard¹ points out that the number of people in a group may increase by simple mathematical progression, but the increase of relationships comes through geometric progression.

Two variables are defined. Let Y equal the number of persons in the group, and X the number of personal relationships between the members. Then using the formula $x = \frac{Y^2 - Y}{2}$, as Bossard has,

¹ James H. S. Bossard. *The Sociology of Child Development*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948. p. 146.

we find that the larger the group, the more disproportionate the increase of personal relationships.

Size of group:	2	3	5	8	12	15	35
Relationships:	1	3	10	28	66	105	595

Note how radically the number of relationships increases with the addition of one or two people. What does this do to the young child in terms of communication, understanding, and ability to participate without pressure or frustrations?

Goodwin Watson presents a psychological proposition: "The right size of group for any activity depends on both the maturity of the individual and the nature of the activity." Hundreds or thousands may be spectators at a film, a TV presentation, or a spectacle. Working, interacting groups seem to do best when composed of five to eight members. If the group is larger, some become performers and others spectators. At age six, spontaneous groups seldom exceed three or four children. Sizes now accepted for school classes are much too large for good cooperative work.²

² Goodwin B. Watson. *What Psychology Can We Trust?* New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1961. p. 15.

Team teaching experimenters, especially those concerned with group size, work on this premise. They believe the maximum size for discussion groups is 8 persons. A group of 8 to 15 is satisfactory for decision making.

With the formula used by Bossard, we see that in a group of 5, a child must relate to 10 interactions. In this group, he may contribute often, react to, and interact with ideas and behaviors of all the others. His is full participation. In a group of 12, there are 66 interactions possible. The range of reactions is greater, but not considered beyond the child's ability to cope. In a group of 15, however, 105 relationships give very little chance for successful interaction by all members of the group. If one must have 35 children in a group, there might as well be 50 or 100.

Can we assume full participation for all classroom groups? No. The clue here is that groups of varying sizes will work effectively in different ways. Group purposes, child activity, and the teacher role change with each group in the classroom.

Composition of a Group

Who is grouped? By whom? Ability grouping, which is so frequently dependent upon verbal aptitude, limits the range of relationships for an individual if used for all classroom activities. It means the teacher does the grouping and little choice is afforded the child. Choice raises the level of interest and strengthens the group's purposes. Why not let the children have a voice in deciding who shall belong to the group?

Children need the opportunity to work with others who vary in age, sex, interest and potential. A group of fourth graders studying adobe houses needs diversity of

talents—readers, artists, and constructors—as a ball team needs its steady outfielders, its hitters, and pitchers. An approach to grouping focused on adequacies and potentials is positive as well as instructionally and psychologically sound.

Purposes Make Differences

Informal, temporary groups occur frequently. During an activity period 2 or 3 children may voluntarily play a reading game or record the day's temperature. More formal groups of 5 or 6 work several days to plan and prepare a mural or locate and map the Erie Canal. Permanent subject-matter groups are likely to exist all year.

We know of experiments using cluster groups, inter-age groups, special help groups, help-by-choice groups, and tutorial groups. The effort to revitalize grouping has not neglected such familiar types as ability grouping, interest groups, homogeneous groups, and sociometric groups. Purposes for such groups can be development of skills, study and practice, or gathering and organizing information. Some may be just for fun or to satisfy curiosity. Others may be for achieving a special task. Multiple interactions are experienced by being in more than one of these groups, and this contributes to the individual's personal and intellectual progress.

The teacher, while having reasons for organizing a group, cannot always impose his purposes upon the children. It is important that the children want the group to exist. Group purposes are formulated and agreed upon by each member, though perhaps unconsciously in

Mary-Margaret Scobey is Professor of Education, San Francisco State College, California.

some temporary groups. The purposes thus defined will help direct tasks and experiences.

Guiding the Group Activity

How the teacher guides the group's activity has a significant relationship to how the pupils participate. The best education is the result of the learner's experience that is integrated within him. A kind of fermentation must take place. This does not result from the teacher's telling, pressuring, requiring. Reading assignments or answering questions is not enough. The children who learn most are those who are interested and involved in the group's work. Many and varied experiences are necessary.

Planning of activities is the business of the children with the teacher's guidance. Each member accepts some responsibility. The teacher helps the group identify problems and solve them cooperatively. Within group interaction, various ways of attacking problems are encouraged. In making decisions, each child is guided to represent his own interests but also to be sensitive to the group welfare. Discoveries are made and shared. Time is provided for ideas to be heard, positions defended, and for misconceptions to be clarified. The group utilizes concrete examples and works toward abstractions, generalization over a wide area. The teacher makes it possible to gather information from a variety of differentiated sources and materials: people, places, pictures, things, charts, schedules, maps, books, magazines and bulletins. Self direction is constantly fostered, as are curiosity, interest, creativity, and initiative.

Just "to group" is not the aim. Children cannot operate within a group instinctively. Grouping demands careful

planning and skillful guidance by the teacher. It takes effort to propel and expedite the learning process. Successful results from grouping depend as much on *how* the teacher works as upon *what* is taught.

Guiding Human Relationships

The success of a group may well depend on how the children feel about the group. In every relationship, whether it be a science research group or the cast of a play, the teacher has a responsibility. He builds "togetherness." He encourages a warm understanding among children, and between the children and himself. He demonstrates kindness, respect, cooperation, trust, and consistent behavior; he expects similar behavior among his pupils. He avoids tattling, deception, aggression, rejection and scapegoating. He recognizes every child as unique.

The whole class works toward group understanding and acceptance. The teacher and the children have fun together. They remember absent children and welcome and take interest in new children. They listen to and consider suggestions from others. They value free expression of opinions and concerns. They plan, ask questions, think critically, and solve problems together—and they help and reassure each other. Rules are made by common consent and agreement to abide by them. Strengths and weaknesses of individuals are recognized. The goal is to assure each child that he "belongs" and is valued within the group.

All this the teacher develops through conscious planning of appropriate learning opportunities and through guidance of thought and behavior. It takes time. And it takes effort to produce a feeling

(Continued on page 208)

Classroom Groups—Scobey

(Continued from page 154)

of belonging and worth. It takes a sensitive teacher to understand how children feel about themselves, about each other, and about the group situation.

Outcomes of Grouping

Grouping can produce effective instruction. Children grow academically and personally. They work toward a common goal and learn from one another. There is increased ability to think, communicate, solve problems, and to gather and organize information. They learn to plan with others and execute plans together. They learn to give a

helping hand, to cooperate and to accept responsibility. They become involved in continuous evaluation of their activities.

Some situations call for leading, others for following. With many opportunities to contribute, children come to recognize their own strengths and weaknesses. They accept and value personal differences and see themselves in relation to others. They learn to tolerate their own failures and be sympathetic with those of others. Both teacher and child understand what each has to offer, and they respect the rights of others. The fact that children learn to know themselves and gain self respect is one of the greatest assets of group interaction.

Announcing

The Ninth Curriculum Research Institute (Eastern Section)

Sponsored by

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum
Development in cooperation with
The National Institute of Mental Health

February 29-March 3, 1964
Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D. C.

Theme: Theories of Instruction

For complete information, write:

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D. C. 20036

Copyright © 1963 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.