

Grouping for READING

OR

for READING INSTRUCTION?

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READING, however one wishes to define it, is not an act that can be performed in a group. Reading is communication between an author and an individual.

The title of this article may imply a misconception, for while individuals can be grouped together to learn and practice skills, share ideas and orally interpret printed material, the reading act itself is a visual-mental activity between the writer and his audience of one. The reader internalizes the symbols he sees and finds in the symbols meanings drawn from his own experiential background. Teachers can help children learn to read in groups or individually but reading itself cannot be a group activity. Let us then consider the topic to be "Grouping for Reading Instruction and Interpretation."

Prior to 1930, grouping for reading instruction was almost unheard of, although from the beginning of education learners have been grouped by age levels, interests, needs, abilities, or what have you.

The growth in size of public schools

in large population centers brought more and more children together so that divisions had to be made. Sex, academic ability, economic levels, vocational interests, and a multitude of other discriminating techniques were applied until finally one could find school placement based solely on a child's reading level.

Today it is not unusual to find children of a narrow age range or grade level divided into many reading ability groups. When, as so often happens in education, the movement gained momentum, the practice became a prison. The three-ability-reading-groups pattern, self-perpetuating, inflexible and fragmenting, became a ritual worshipped by many supervisors, coordinators and superintendents and followed slavishly by teachers. Several generations of children have been labeled in first grade and have carried that label with them throughout their school years, possibly beyond. Let it be noted, however, that humane and creative teachers have ignored the stereotyping throughout these thirty some years.

Studies of Grouping

Most of the research studies on grouping have been quite inconclusive, although Halliwell¹ shows some statistical significance and some favorable-though-not-statistically-significant implications for non-graded grouping. However, this researcher notes that the findings were confused by concomitant changes in the school. Evidence concerning grouping seems to be in peripheral implications from a wide variety of researches established to assess teaching methods and materials.

Grouping is not a method of teaching reading. Any method can be used in any group. Grouping, like individualizing instruction, is an organizational technique that is designed to facilitate learning. Basal, phonic, i.e., linguistic, experience-content, these are methods. Teaching children individually and/or in groups does not preclude the use of any method. It seems rather obvious that method and organization should not be measured the one against the other. In looking at the research in method, one is impressed by certain conclusions and implications that appear and reappear in a wide cross section of research and from which some conclusions for grouping can be drawn.

In examining the titles of the 264 reading research studies listed in *The Reading Teacher*,² researchers have found that less than 2 percent dealt with

the thorny question of grouping and yet this is one of the major problems of teachers of reading. Grouping in reading may be as flexible as three children brought together to practice some specific reading skill. On the other hand, grouping in reading can be as highly organized as the Joplin plan, in which children scoring within certain intervals on standardized and/or informal reading tests go daily to a reading teacher who organizes the children into groups as homogeneously as possible.

A review of twenty of the twenty-seven reports of First Grade Reading Studies, funded by the U.S. Office of Education, published in the May 1966 issue of *The Reading Teacher*³ also revealed an astonishing number of these studies reporting method, but not organization for teaching reading. One is led to believe that with two exceptions the children (26-35) in a class were taught as a whole or in ability groups.

Some of the most positive findings, however, were stated by Doris U. Spencer⁴ in summarizing her study, "Individualized First Grade Reading Versus a Basal Reader Program in Rural Communities." Again one might conclude from these brief descriptions that organization may be equally as, if not more important than, method. Classroom organization and the teacher seem especially significant since the attitudes, knowledge of various methods and general interest in improving the teaching of reading appear again and again as implications in many of the studies.

³ *The Reading Teacher* 19: 563-675; 1966.

⁴ Doris U. Spencer. "Individualized First Grade Reading Versus a Basal Reader Program in Rural Communities." *The Reading Teacher* 19: 595-600; 1966.

¹ Joseph W. Halliwell. "A Comparison of Pupil Achievement in Graded and Nongraded Primary Classrooms." *Journal of Experimental Education* 32: 59-64; 1963.

² Helen M. Robinson, Samuel Weintraub and Carol A. Hostetter. "Summary of Investigations Relating to Reading, July 1, 1963 to June 30, 1964." *The Reading Teacher* 18: 331-428; 1965.

The Hawthorne effect may skew results undesirably in research studies but this peripheral benefit in improved educational programs needs to be fostered in on-going innovative programs in which teachers and children are experimental in trying out new ideas.

It is not grouping that is wrong, but what has been done in the name of grouping that has held teachers and children in a vise. On the positive side, the individualized reading instruction movement, which never really got off the ground although it was a severe threat to the status quo, has catapulted some teachers into thinking about the serious harm that rigid, inflexible grouping has imposed on some children. Yet individualized reading could not expunge the need for grouping, nor did it try. Variety, expediency, common needs, interests provide a kaleidoscope of reasons for establishing and disbanding groups as the needs of children are being met.

In the early grades, when children are introduced to the complexities of our phonemic-graphemic systems, it would seem that children in quite small groups could profit by working together in discovering the regular, semi-regular, and irregular ways in which phonemes pattern. When this is learned, it would seem that the word analysis drills that seem to continue endlessly in some of the reading programs could be discontinued. When these mechanics are under control, the teacher's role changes. Now the teacher becomes a discussion leader, a diagnostician of needs and a planner. All three roles should be shared with children some of the time.

Independence in reading cannot be programmed for groups. The very fact

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that children achieve independence at varying rates and at varying levels seems to deny the value of rigid A, B and C grouping.

A Solitary Act

Reading is a solitary act and whether the same story is read by one child or many or whether every child reads a different piece, they do it alone. Only at the very beginning do children need to read orally so that they know they are reading and even then they do not really

need an audience. Oral reading is speaking and interpreting the author's words to an audience. There are and should be many opportunities for children to read aloud but this is not the reading act, but rather a sharing experience.

In the process of education and specifically English education, speaking, listening, reading and writing skills are the foundation of all learnings and are our most useful tools. The mechanics of these skills can be mastered early but the fine polishing requires years of practice in real situations that grow out of the total curriculum. In English impression and expression the "learning to" is only the beginning of a long and exacting program. Knowing about language and how it works; knowing how to write, learning to appreciate writing, being able to evaluate writing and learning to improve one's own writing; knowing how to read the literature of English; and finally being able to use language in its very best sense, these are the purposes of English language education.

How does grouping for reading fit into this statement of goals? There are social, emotional and intellectual reasons for putting learners into groups. Common needs, age, sex, interests and acculturation are a few of them. There are probably some occasions when masses can profit from the same exposure such as seeing plays, storytelling, oral reading, choral speaking, poetry reading and others. Even some of these at times should be shared in small intimate groups where the teacher can get very close to the learners to help them in their evaluation of content, performance, and appropriate treatment.

In "grouping for teaching reading,"

flexibility is probably the major condition. It is doubtful that there are definitive steps to excellence in reading that can be parceled out month by month and year by year. Many people do not believe that there is such a person as a first grade reader or a fifth grade reader. New and expanded skills should be taught as the need for them occurs regardless of age or grade. The curriculum makers are the arbiters of what content shall be taught. The needs of the children are the dictators of when certain skills are needed.

One child, six or twelve or more, may need to be introduced to new skills, put into situations where he can practice and finally use these skills in the content of literature or other subject matter areas. If this can be done most efficiently in programmed, computer or other individual ways, so be it. If not, probably quite small groups will be most effective: small groups that are set up and disbanded as the needs are met; small groups in which neither age nor ability level are the major determiners but rather "Who can profit from the experience?"

A true "reading group" is one in which the child brings to the discussion table the attitudes, understandings, facts and perplexities he has experienced in reading. Here in a life situation he learns what reading really means. Size of schools or organizational patterns vary but within any framework the grouping of children can and should be planned as needs arise and interests require. Placement in educational levels for extended periods of time should not be determined by reading ability alone but rather by age or maturity levels. ☞

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