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Attitudes Toward Learning in Ability Groups

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ATTITUDES TOWARD LEARNING
IN ABILITY GROUPS

William J. Strater

ATTITUDES TOWARD LEARNING IN ABILITY GROUPS

A Paper

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Of The Requirements For The Degree

Master of Science in Education

by

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

The problem with which this paper is concerned is whether or not
grouping students by ability produces more favorable attitudes toward
learning activities than grouping by the heterogeneous method.

Definitions of Terms Used

Shall we group homogeneously or heterogeneously? In attempting
to answer this question, it is necessary to define the two terms.
Homogeneous grouping is an attempt to bring together convenient sized
groups or classes of children who are similar in ability, age, industry,
previous experience, and other factors which effect learning.[1]

Heterogeneous grouping is an attempt to bring together pupils in
a group who differ in kind, have unlike qualities, or possess different
characteristics. Complete homogeneity, of course, is impossible because
within every group there are students who differ slightly from others.
Therefore, the meaning of the two terms would be clarified if we call
one heterogeneous grouping and the other reduced heterogeneous grouping.[2]

Attitudes are somewhat more difficult to test than achievement.
If a person takes a questionnaire, reads the directions, and responds
to the items, he will discover that he is able to present the picture

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[1]Lloyd J. Trump, Pupil Grouping (Champaign, Illinois: The Junior
High School Association of Illinois, 1951), p. 19.

[2]Roy O. Billet, The Grouping of Pupils (Bloomington, Illinois:
National Society for the Study of Education, 35th Yearbook, 1936), pp. 217-
221.

of the problem which he wishes to present. Therefore, realizing the limitations of a questionnaire, it still seems the best feasible method to use.

The Hypothesis

Three hypotheses are considered in this paper. The first two hypotheses are tested by tabulations from the same questionnaire. The third hypothesis is testing information from achievement tests.

The hypotheses are: (a) the attitudes of elementary and junior high teachers will not differ concerning the attitudes toward learning activities in students of all levels of ability when homogeneous grouping is used, and (b) there is a correlation between attitudes of elementary and junior high teachers toward grouping and years of teaching experience, and (c) that achievement tests show that there is an increase in pupil achievement when students are grouped homogeneously.

CHAPTER II

KINDS OF ABILITY GROUPING

Homogeneous Grouping Versus Heterogeneous Grouping

Some people feel that homogeneous grouping is inferior to hetero-
geneous grouping. Jannette Veatch argues that in life we do not group
on the basis of age or abilities. We might find children four, five,
six, or ten years old playing together, and it is not unusual to see a
young man playing golf with an elderly man. Therefore, if we are not
going to group homogeneously in life situations, why should we do it in
our reading and other school programs?[3] Another argument against homo-
geneous grouping is that putting the child in this kind of situation
might cause him to lose social status among his peers. In contrast, there
are arguments supporting homogeneous grouping. Most teachers approve
of some sort of homogeneous grouping. It appears to be an efficient means
of handling specific types of instruction for a large number of pupils.

> The principle of grouping for subjects should be to
> produce a situation which facilitates adjustment of
> instruction to individual differences. Homogeneous group-
> ing fulfills this principle.[4]

Homogeneous grouping also helps children develop themselves socially
because they experience acceptance into a group situation which otherwise
might not have been possible had they not been grouped homogeneously.[5]

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[3]Jannette Veatch, "Grouping in the Whole School," Association for
Childhood Education, XXXI (September, 1954), pp. 62-64.

[4]Miles A. Tinker, Teaching Elementary Reading (New York: Appleton-
Century-Crofts, Inc., 1952), pp. 201-204.

[5]Etta Rose Bailey, "What Groups Do For Children," Association for
Childhood Education, XXXXVII (April, 1954), pp. 60-62.

Other admitted difficulties in ability grouping are: (a) children feel the stigma of assignment to a slow group; (b) parents resent their children being put into slow group; (c) many teachers are reluctant to accept assignment to a slow group and have no specific preparation for dealing skillfully with children who have learning problems.[6]

Those who oppose ability grouping argue that pupil interest and motivation do not receive sufficient consideration and that it is undemocratic because it tends to accentuate social stratification.[7]

Basis for Grouping

Philip E. Vernon of the University of London, in his article, "Education and the Psychology of Individual Differences," in the *Harvard Education Review*, has this to say:

> Instead of grouping by general intelligence and previous achievement, we should consider type of ability and interests along special lines. This might be called 'multidimensional' as opposed to the 'unidimensional' approach. There are many dangers in introducing anything that implies competitive selection or stereotyping of ability levels. It is, therefore, preferable to keep grouping by age, and later by interest, as far as possible.[8]

Until children are nine years of age or in the fourth grade, there would seem to be no good reason for any ability grouping other than segregation of the lower grade feeble-minded and perhaps temporary remedial classes for the grade defectives and the very backward. Between the fourth grade and the eighth grade, one can only suggest that the curriculum be largely of an exploratory or diagnostic character designed not

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[6]Mary J. Loomis, "The Right Child in the Right Classroom," *Journal National Education Association*, XXXXVIII (September, 1959), p. 17.

[7]*Ibid*., p. 18.

[8]*Ibid*.

merely to provide essential skills, but also to stimulate general mental development and to provide experiences from which interests can be built. Even when grouping is introduced, there should be sufficient overlapping between groups to make transfer in either direction easily executed.[9]

Several studies indicate that, when children are grouped according to their mental ability, there is a concentration of the so-called behavior problem pupils in the low-ability group. This does not create a desirable learning situation.

The purpose in assigning pupils homogeneously by subjects needs to be well understood by parent, teacher and pupil. Homogeneous grouping appears to be an efficient means of handling specific types of instruction for large numbers of pupils.

Possible ways of determining the child's grouping level are the oral, intelligence, silent, and other standardized tests. However, in general, standardized test scores are interpreted in a manner that tends to place pupils about even with their instructional levels. The teacher must realize that any standardized test is just one method of determining grade placement. Therefore, the teacher must not base his decision on one test, but instead, he should administer as many of these tests as he thinks necessary as well as using his own personal judgment.

Children may also be grouped according to their interests. For example, if within a class there were four children interested in birds, these pupils could be placed in one group. This method of grouping could be much more meaningful in some classes than grouping the students by

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[9]Ibid., p. 19.

other methods. In some courses the student should learn the information that may help him even though he isn't interested in the subject.

Children may also be grouped by their special needs. For example, the children having trouble with phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, or any other special difficulty, would be put into a group having the same difficulties. This is a good method because the teacher is faced with one basic problem which is common to all the students in that particular group. Thus, it is less difficult to meet the needs of the individuals.

A less popular method than those mentioned previously is grouping on the basis of sex. This could be effective, if used in connection with various units. For example, in reading about pioneers, it would be acceptable to let the girls study the habits and problems of pioneer women and the boys study the habits and problems of men in those days. However, this type of grouping would be used at a minimum, in comparison to other types of grouping, because most subject matter is set up to meet the requirements of the curriculum in which both sexes must participate.

By itself, grouping serves no purpose, and it should be discarded unless it fits a specifically defined objective. There is no magic in the three groups accelerated, middle, and slow. However, this is all people have heard, when discussing grouping for the past few years. Thus, they are not too aware of the other methods.[10]

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[10]Willard Abraham, "A New Look at Reading," Elementary English (November, 1954), pp. 142-143.

Harris suggested that the beginning teacher separate his class into groups with about two-thirds in the upper group and one-third of the class in the lower group.[11] The advantage of this method of grouping is that the beginning teacher would not jump head first into grouping but rather can experiment with a two system situation more easily.

Another grouping method is the accidental grouping plan. The material is provided and displayed to all students. The idea is that the slow students could not manage the hard reading and so would seek easier material. Likewise, the fast reader in a slow group would become bored and seek new challenges.[12] The weakness in this is that the good reader may not, on his own initiative, seek harder material to read, and as a result, this reader would not achieve to his full capacity.

The individual teacher should decide how many groups he is going to have, because the method that works in one classroom situation may not work in another.

Some basic things which must be taken into consideration before the group size to be used is decided include: range of ability, variety of needs, interests of group, class size, teachers' administrative skills, and the amount and quality of materials available.[13]

Flexibility in Grouping

A general agreement is that the grouping program should be flexible. It would not be static, but should be a shifting process as the

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[11]Albert J. Harris, How To Increase Reading Ability (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1940), pp. 122-150.

[12]E. W. Dolch, "Groups in Reading," Education Digest, XXI (September, 1955), pp. 28-31.

[13]Emmett A. Betts, Reading in the Elementary School (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 271.

needs, interests, and capabilities of the children vary and are met. If a child's needs may better be met in a group other than the one he is in, he should be transferred.

However, in transferring a child from one group to another, a teacher must be sure that the child is prepared for the move. If the child is put into a situation for which he has not been prepared, possibly he will not adjust properly to the group. As a result, the child's learning could be impaired. Groups should be flexible enough that through-out the year different groups may be organized for various purposes. This will require the child to work with different members of the entire class.

A factor involved in grouping which must be handled very carefully is naming groups. When groups are labeled one and two or A and B, the youngster quickly realizes that he is in the slow or the fast group. Those who are in the fast or average group may direct some distasteful teasing toward those in the slower group, thus stifling the advancement of the slower pupils.[14]

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[14]Ibid., p. 133.

CHAPTER III

THE FINDINGS

As previously stated, the method of testing the first hypothesis
was a questionnaire. The questionnaire surveyed teachers' opinions on
ability grouping. A copy of the questionnaire is found in the Appendix
for reference.

This questionnaire was given to 132 teachers in five elementary
and junior high schools in the Hammond, Indiana public school system.
There were 53 elementary teachers and 45 junior high teachers; 74% of
the teachers returned the questionnaire. The members of the survey group
who were given the questionnaire were asked to fill them out honestly
and anonymously.

The Hammond school system has been using some type of ability
grouping for the past six years. Most of the teachers who returned the
questionnaire have had some experience with homogeneous grouping.

The questionnaire contains fourteen statements. Each statement
has been broken down to indicate the number of elementary and junior high
teachers who agree, who are undecided, and who disagree. The results
can be found in Table 1.

TABLE 1

PERCENT OF ELEMENTARY AND JUNIOR HIGH TEACHERS WHO AGREE, WHO ARE
UNDECIDED AND DISAGREE ON ATTITUDES OF HOMOGENEOUS GROUPING

	Elementary						Junior High					
	No. Agree	%	No. Undecided	%	No. Disagree	%	No. Agree	%	No. Undecided	%	No. Disagree	%
1. Students with limited ability seem happier in homogeneous groups.	30	56	6	11	17	32	28	62	4	8	13	28
2. Students who are grouped homogenerously show greater progress on achievement tests.	11	20	28	52	14	26	12	25	25	52	11	24
3. Students who are grouped homogeneously placed have a greater opportunity to learn.	33	62	8	15	11	20	20	44	11	24	14	31
4. Ability grouping is beneficial for all types of subject matter.	14	26	5	9	32	60	12	26	3	6	30	66
5. Children with high ability are more challenged when working in homogeneous groups.	35	66	4	7	14	26	30	65	4	7	13	27
6. Student participation is increased in homogeneous grouping.	34	64	6	11	13	24	31	68	3	6	11	24

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Elementary						Junior High					
	No. Agree	%	No. Undecided	%	No. Disagree	%	No. Agree	%	No. Undecided	%	No. Disagree	%
7. Grouping is less valuable in the low ability range than in the high ability range as measured by the progress attained.	20	37	8	15	25	47	19	42	11	24	14	31
8. Grouping produces an attitude of superiority on the part of the high ability student toward those of lessor ability.	25	47	10	18	18	33	23	51	8	17	14	31
9. Grouping produces an attitude of inferiority on the part of the low ability students.	35	66	8	15	9	16	28	62	6	13	11	24
10. Ability grouping tends to decrease major discipline problems.	36	67	4	7	14	26	25	55	8	17	13	28
11. In organizing an academic curriculum ability grouping should be a primary technique.	25	47	6	11	22	41	20	44	9	20	16	35
12. In ability grouping, the average and low groups may be penalized by missing on the contributions of the high groups.	41	76	5	9	8	15	35	77	3	6	8	17
13. Middle ability students will be motivated as a result of being grouped.	38	71	9	16	6	11	33	73	4	7	8	17
14. Ability grouped students make greater progress in all types of subject matter.	29	54	10	18	14	26	27	60	6	13	12	26

The first hypothesis (a) the attitudes of elementary and junior high teachers will not differ concerning the attitudes toward learning acitivities in students of all levels of ability when homogeneous grouping is used. This hypothesis was proven by the similarity in the answers on the questionnaire by the junior high teachers and the elementary teachers. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the teachers' opinions of the fourteen statements.

The questionnaire that was used to test the first hypothesis was also used to test the second hypothesis. There is a correlation between attitudes of elementary and junior high teachers toward grouping and years of experience. The questionnaire was broken down into four groups: (1) elementary teachers under 10 years teaching experience, (2) elementary teachers 10 years or more teaching experience, (3) junior high teachers under 10 years teaching experience, and (4) junior high teachers 10 years or more teaching experience. Ten years was used as a dividing place because the average years teaching experience of the teachers who returned the questionnaire was 10 years.

Tables 2 and 3 show the similarity between the elementary and junior high scores and years experience.

TABLE 2

PERCENT OF JUNIOR HIGH TEACHERS WHO HAVE 10 YEARS TEACHING EXPERIENCE
AND THE PERCENT OF JUNIOR HIGH TEACHERS WHO HAVE UNDER 10 YEARS TEACHING
EXPERIENCE CONCERNING THEIR ATTITUDES ON HOMOGENEOUS GROUPING

	Elementary Teachers With Under 10 Years Experience						Junior High Teachers With Under 10 Years Experience					
	No. Agree	%	No. Undecided	%	No. Disagree	%	No. Agree	%	No. Undecided	%	No. Disagree	%
1. Students with limited ability seem happier in homogeneous grouping.	14	60	2	8	7	30	14	63	2	9	6	27
2. Students who are grouped homogeneously show greater progress on achievement tests.	5	20	15	60	5	20	7	30	10	43	6	26
3. Students who are homogeneously placed have a greater opportunity to learn.	15	54	6	21	7	25	5	29	5	29	7	41
4. Ability grouping is beneficial for all types of subject matter.	6	25	3	12	15	62	6	28	0	0	15	71
5. Children with high ability are more challenged when working in homogeneous groups.	14	60	3	13	6	26	16	66	1	4	7	29
6. Student participation is increased in homogeneous grouping.	16	64	2	8	7	28	15	75	1	5	4	20
7. Grouping is less valuable in the low ability range than in the high ability range as measured by the progress attained.	8	40	6	30	6	30	13	50	6	23	7	26

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Elementary Teachers with Under 10 Years Experience						Junior High Teachers with Under 10 Years Experience					
	No. Agree	%	No. Undecided	%	No. Disagree	%	No. Agree	%	No. Undecided	%	No. Disagree	%
8. Grouping produces an attitude of superiority on the part of the high ability student toward those of lessor ability.	11	47	5	21	7	30	13	50	6	23	7	26
9. Grouping produces an attitude of inferiority on the part of the low ability students.	12	60	3	15	5	25	16	64	3	12	6	24
10. Ability grouping tends to decrease major discipline problems.	15	55	5	18	7	25	10	52	3	15	6	31
11. In organizing an academic curriculum, ability grouping should be a primary technique.	10	41	5	20	9	37	10	47	4	19	7	33
12. In ability grouping, the average and low groups may be penalized by missing on the contributions of the high group.	17	80	1	4	3	14	18	75	2	8	4	16
13. Middle ability students will be more motivated as a result of being grouped.	16	69	2	8	5	21	18	78	2	8	3	13
14. Ability grouped students make greater progress in all types of subject matter.	15	60	3	12	7	28	12	60	3	15	5	25

TABLE 3

PERCENT OF ELEMENTARY TEACHERS WHO HAVE OVER 10 YEARS TEACHING EXPERIENCE
AND THE PERCENT OF ELEMENTARY TEACHERS WHO HAVE UNDER 10 YEARS TEACHING
EXPERIENCE CONCERNING THEIR ATTITUDES ON HOMOGENEOUS GROUPING

	Elementary Teachers Who Have Over 10 Years Teaching Experience						Junior High Teachers Who Have Over 10 Years Teaching Experience					
	No. Agree	%	No. Undecided	%	No. Disagree	%	No. Agree	%	No. Undecided	%	No. Disagree	%
1. Students with limited ability seem happier in homogeneous grouping.	16	57	3	10	9	32	14	56	3	12	8	32
2. Students who are grouped homogeneously show greater progress on achievement tests.	5	18	15	55	7	25	6	24	12	48	7	28
3. Students who are homogeneously placed have a greater opportunity to learn.	15	60	3	12	7	28	17	65	5	19	4	15
4. Ability grouping is beneficial for all types of subject matter.	6	25	3	12	15	62	8	29	2	7	17	62
5. Children with high ability are more challenged when working in homogeneous groups.	17	62	2	7	8	29	18	69	2	7	6	23
6. Student participation is increased in homogeneous grouping.	19	63	4	13	7	23	15	62	2	8	6	25
7. Grouping is less valuable in the low ability range than in the high ability range as measured by the progress attained.	11	37	3	10	15	51	9	37	5	20	10	12

TABLE 3 (Continued)

	Elementary Teachers Who Have Over 10 Years Teaching Experience						Junior High Teachers Who Have Over 10 Years Teaching Experience					
	No. Agree	%	No. Undecided	%	No. Disagree	%	No. Agree	%	No. Undecided	%	No. Disagree	%
8. Grouping produces an attitude of superiority on the part of the high ability student toward those of lessor ability.	12	48	4	16	9	36	13	46	6	21	9	32
9. Grouping produces an attitude of inferiority on the part of the low ability students.	18	64	5	17	5	17	17	70	3	12	4	16
10. Ability grouping tends to decrease major discipline problems.	19	70	2	7	6	22	17	62	2	7	8	29
11. In organizing an academic curriculum, ability grouping should be a primary technique.	13	46	4	14	11	39	12	48	2	8	11	44
12. In ability grouping, the average and low groups may be penalized by missing on the contributions of the high group.	23	77	3	10	4	13	18	75	2	8	4	16
13. Middle ability students will be more motivated as a result of being grouped.	18	75	4	16	2	8	20	68	5	17	4	13
14. Ability grouped students make greater progress in all types of subject matter.	16	55	5	17	8	27	13	54	5	20	6	25

The findings of the questionnaire support the second hypothesis.
The scores on the questionnaire indicate that there is a close correla-
tion between the junior high teachers and the elementary teachers and
that years of experience are not a factor in attitude toward grouping.

The third hypothesis that was considered was that achievement tests
show that there is an increase in pupil achievement when students are
grouped homogeneously. The Stanford Achievement Tests were given to
sixty-six students at the Lafayette Junior High School in Hammond,
Indiana, on September 15, 1958. The battery median was six years seven
months while the grade placement was seven, showing a deficit of three
months. The Stanford Achievement Tests were given again to the same
group of students on February 8, 1960. After the achievement tests were
given in 1958, the students were grouped homogeneously into three groups:
slow, middle, and accelerated. These groups were determined by achieve-
ment tests, interests, ability, and sociability.

The third hypothesis was proven in that the accelerated group had
gained five months, the slow group gained two months and the average
group stayed even under the homogeneous grouping plan. Table 4 shows
the battery scores and the grade placement for the three groups and their
gain in achievement.

TABLE 4

ACHIEVEMENT TEST OF SIXTY-SIX JUNIOR HIGH STUDENTS

Group	Battery Med. 1958	Grade Plac. 1958	Battery Med. 1960	Grade Plac. 1960	Gain
Accelerated	8.5	7.0	10.5	8.5	5
Average	6.9	7.0	8.4	8.5	0
Slow	5.5	7.0	7.2	8.5	2

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY

The problem of this paper was to find out if homogeneous grouping produces more favorable attitudes toward learning than the heterogeneous method.

Some of the reasons for grouping homogeneously were because of special needs, abilities, interests and sociability.

There should be flexibility in grouping because the child's needs, interests and capabilities are always changing and these changes must be met.

In proving that homogeneous grouping has more favorable attitudes than heterogeneous grouping, three hypotheses were tested. The first hypothesis (a) the attitudes of elementary and junior high teachers will not differ concerning the attitudes toward learning activities in students of all levels of ability when homogeneous grouping is used. This hypothesis was proven by the similarities in the percentage scores of the teachers on the questionnaire concerning homogeneous grouping.

The second hypothesis (b) there is a correlation between attitudes of elementary and junior high teachers toward grouping and teaching experience. The percentages on Table 2 and 3 prove there is a correlation between attitudes of elementary and junior high teachers, and teaching experience is not a factor in grouping.

The third hypothesis (c) achievement tests show there is an increase in pupil achievement when students are grouped homogeneously. Table 4

shows that the accelerated group had gained five months in a year and a half. The slow group gained two months. The average group stayed the same. Pupils will gain in achievement when grouped homogeneously was proven by the third hypothesis.

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APPENDIX

ABILITY GROUPING SURVEY

ABILITY GROUPING SURVEY

Years of Experience_____

Position_____

Grade Level_____

From the rating scale below, please rate the statements by encircling the number that indicates your attitude.

Agree	Agree With Reservations	Undecided	Disagree With Reservations	Disagree
1	2	3	4	5

1 2 3 4 5   1. Students with limited ability seem happier in homogeneous grouping.

1 2 3 4 5   2. Students who are grouped homogeneously show greater progress on achievement tests.

1 2 3 4 5   3. Students who are homogeneously placed have a greater opportunity to learn.

1 2 3 4 5   4. Ability grouping is beneficial for all types of subject matter.

1 2 3 4 5   5. Children with high ability are more challenged when working in homogeneous groups.

1 2 3 4 5   6. Student participation is increased in homogeneous grouping.

1 2 3 4 5   7. Grouping is less valuable in the low ability range than in the high ability range as measured by progress attained.

1 2 3 4 5   8. Grouping produces an attitude of superiority on the part of the high ability students toward those of lesser ability.

1 2 3 4 5   9. Grouping produces an attitude of inferiority on the part of the low ability students.

1 2 3 4 5   10. Ability grouping tends to decrease major discipline problems.

1 2 3 4 5   11. In organizing an academic curriculum, ability grouping should be a primary technique.

1 2 3 4 5   12. In ability grouping, the average and low groups may be penalized (short changed) by missing out on the contributions of the high group.

1 2 3 4 5   13. Middle ability students will be more motivated as a result of being grouped.

1 2 3 4 5   14. Ability grouped students make greater progress in all types of subject matter.

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