



The Grouping Method of Instruction Bases, Benefits and Challenges

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Introduction:

Lecturing method or whole class instruction approach is still the most dominant method. Many educators argue that lecturing is the poorest method because it tends to keep students passive. They argue that the ultimate goal of teaching is to make students think. This argument is as much in favor of discussions, seminars, grouping, as it is against lecturing. Educators who view education as the acquisition of information or explicit learning rather than development of thinking skills or critical perspectives find discussion of little immediate value. (Shamra and Tuteja, 1994).

In whole class education the main role of the instructor is a dispenser of information and knowledge. Here she does not care much about the individual differences among students within the whole class. Students of the same age do not learn at the same rate. Instructors can handle the problem of individual differences by varying their instructional methods

and techniques and by using modern instructional media such as audio cassettes, video tapes, computer discs and CDs, and internet. The development of instructional methods and techniques include grouping, discussions, cooperative learning, problem- solving, role- playing, etc. By using such various methods and techniques, the role of the instructor has changed from a dispenser of information into a facilitator whose main job is to help students learn independently and to be responsible for their learning.

Much of the traditional learning process is based on competition not on cooperation among students. This traditional view ignores that the basic goal of the learning process is to help the student develop mentally, physically as well as socially. The student fulfills his/ her need when he/ she works with a group because humankind is social by nature. Every body needs to belong to a group. The instructional grouping method in this sense serves the social as well as the educational goals.

Sometimes grouping may do a lot of harm to some students and produce negative results contrary to what is

anticipated. Students are grouped homogeneously or heterogeneously for various instructional purposes. If the teacher does not plan and prepare well for the group instruction, disorder will prevail in the classroom and as a result the grouping approach will fail to achieve the anticipated objectives.

The purpose of this article is to identify the benefits of grouping and the problems and challenges of this approach of instruction.

What is a group?

Bany and Johnson (1964) view class group as an association of persons with some degree of give and take in their definition which says: "A class group is described as several persons in a state of social interaction." Newman (1974) states that "only a shared task or goal that makes individuals into a group." Schmuck and Schmuck (1973) view class group as "a collection of interacting persons with some degree of reciprocal influence over one another."

Educators interested in grouping often emphasize that a group must have a common interest or goal or some reason for being a goal. In schools and colleges students are grouped for instructional purposes. The group stays together as long as the specific reason for its establishment still exists.

Bases of Grouping

The grounds on which educational grouping policies are based are many. In this article, the most commonly encountered bases of grouping will be pointed out.

Age:

Chronological age is still the major selection in grouping. It is often called heterogeneous grouping. The range of abilities is so great in this type of grouping.

Ability and Attainment:

Students are grouped according to their performance. It is often called homogeneous grouping. The ability and attainment of students is measured by means of tests, examinations, teacher's assessments, etc. Dobson (1981) states

that "homogeneous groups is a practice where the total student population is divided into instructional groups according to some criterion of likeness." The range of abilities in this type is not so great as it is in grouping by age. The underlying assumption of this type of grouping is that this strategy facilitates the process of learning and teaching as well.

Grouping by ability is an issue of controversy. Advocates of homogeneous grouping point out the following strengths of this approach: more attention may be directed to the abilities and talents of the students; more academic achievement may be attained; materials and procedures are adapted more easily and administrative procedures may be facilitated.

The opponents of grouping by ability point out the following weaknesses: students are usually typed and placed at one level; the organizational pattern may become a rigid administrative pattern; over a long period of time it may become destructive to the individual; segregation of students according to ability is inconsistent with democratic values, and teachers are encouraged to believe that children are alike.

Here, we have to differentiate between two types of ability groupings:

A: Interclass Ability Grouping: In this type, students are assigned to classes according to their performance on intelligence and achievement tests.

B: Intra classroom grouped Ability Grouping: In this type, students are grouped according to ability inside the very classroom.

Mixed- Ability Grouping:

In this type, students are grouped differently. Each group contains students of different abilities.

Interest:

Students are grouped on the basis of interest. Musgrave (1975) states that "Grouping on the basis of interest allows students to research topics from a variety of sources, to report findings to small and large groups orally or in writing, and to organize and develop individual and group projects as they learn to cooperate with other students in a team operation".

Interest grouping allows the student to join the group he or she likes without a pretest. It is democratic since the teacher and the students cooperate, plan, and evaluate together to accomplish individual and curriculum goals and objectives. Interest groups often relieve students and teachers from lectures, recitations and assigned seat-work study.

Interclass- Subject Grouping:

In this type, students are assigned to classrooms and courses on the basis of the subject they are studying.

Needed Skills:

In this type, students are grouped on the basis of needed skills. Individual students' needs are identified and groups are formed according to such skills.

Special Needs:

Mentally retarded and handicapped students can be assigned to schools or institutions specially staffed and equipped to cater for their needs. The underlying assumption is that such students are liable to become insecure and poorly

motivated if they are exposed to regular contacts with normal children. Other assumption is that such students will only be guaranteed the teacher's attention when they have access to special schools.

Socio- economic Stations:

Grouping on the basis of socio-economic status exists as a result of conscious policy in those countries in which there is wholly independent system of education parallel to that provided by the state. Members of the higher socio-economic class can usually send their children to such private education system because they can offer to pay the high fees.

Sex:

Sex differences affect grouping practices in a variety of ways. Boys and girls are sometimes educated apart throughout their school life; another common practice is to organize co-educational schools at the primary stage and separate schools for boys and girls at the secondary level. At some co-educational schools boys and girls are taught in separate classes; at others they are taught together depending on the

subjects being taught, for instance, needle work for girls and metal craft for boys.

General Types of Group Work:

There are three general types of group work: informal learning groups, formal learning groups, and study teams (Johnson, et al, 1991). Informal learning groups are temporary groups within a single class session. Informal learning groups can be initiated for example by asking students to ask a neighbor and spend two minutes discussing a question given by the teacher. You can also form groups of three to five to solve a problem or pose a question. The teacher can organize informal groups at any time in a class of any size to check on students' understanding of the material to give students an opportunity to apply what they are learning, or to provide a change of pace.

Formal learning groups are established to complete a specific task, such as perform a lab experiment, write a report or carry out a project. The groups may complete their work in a single session or over several weeks. Study teams are long-term groups usually for a semester, whose primary

responsibility is to provide members with support, encouragement and assistance in completing course requirements and assignments. Study teams also inform their members about lectures and assignments when someone has missed a session. The larger the class, and the more complex the subject matter, the more valuable study teams can be.

Benefits and Advantages of Grouping

Students learn best when they are actively involved in the process. Researchers report that, regardless of the subject matter, students working in small groups tend to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than when the same content is presented in other instructional formats. Students who work in collaborative groups also appear more satisfied with their classes. (Collier, 1980; Slavin, 1980; McKeachie, et al, 1986; Beckman, 1990; Chickering and Gamson, 1991).

Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Working with others often increases involvement in learning. Sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions

improves thinking and deepens understanding. (Chickering and Gamson, 2003).

Bejarano (1987) conducted a study in which he assessed the effects of two small- group cooperative techniques and the whole- class method on academic achievement in English as a foreign language for seventh- graders (N= 665) revealed that the group methods (Discussion Group and Student Teams and Achievement Divisions) registered significantly greater improvement than the whole class method.

Dep Pree (1998) conducted a study to investigate the influence of small- groupwork on confidence level and achievement of adults in algebra. The results of the study indicated that students who participated in the experimental (small- group) method of instruction experienced significantly greater increase in confidence level, and higher completion rate, than students who participated in the control (lecture) method of instruction. However, no significant differences in achievement were found.

Vaughn, et. Al. (2001) examined recent research related to instructional grouping practices for reading. In comparison

atmosphere of freedom to discuss and express their individual opinions. Students develop a sense of responsibility. The individual student also learns how to coordinate his/ her actions and attitudes with the other members of the group.

Grouping provides interaction among children of different levels of talents, abilities, and skills. Thus students help each other overcome some of the problems they face. Students who need help in basic literacy or other problems may be scattered across groups or across classes because students learn from each other.

Grouping presents the teacher as a resource person, not as a dispenser of information. It introduces him/ her as a facilitator rather than a dominating person. So in this atmosphere, the student is motivated to participate effectively in the group discussions, rather than keep silent listening or pretending to listen to what the teacher delivers.

One of the benefits of grouping is achieving individualization in instruction. Wallen and Wallen (1978) state, "The major purpose of grouping is individualization. Students are grouped so that the range of individual

differences, academic and social characteristics, the teacher has to contend with is narrowed." It also provides an atmosphere of interaction among the members of the group.

Individualized instruction is adopted to tackle some of the problems of grouping. Bright students should be given more challenging and interesting assignments, while slow ones are given minimum assignments and special remedial work.

Problems and Challenges of Grouping

Grouping on the basis of ability or achievement or both is a way of labeling students into 'brights' and 'dulls' and there is no way of disguising or hiding these facts from children. The result is that they will live up or down to these labels as long as they stay in these groups.

The perception of students by both teachers and students is one constant factor in governing the way in which any class works. Swell (1980) concludes from experiments carried out in the United States how information held by teachers could change the way in which students behave. A class of perfectly ordinary students were introduced to a new teacher as the worst-behaved class in the school. Within a week the class was

totally out of control. A few months later the same class was introduced to another new teacher as slow learners. The class as a result diminished in quality and quantity very rapidly. Finally the students were introduced to another teacher as the brightest and most cooperative students in the school. The results were superb.

Review of literature points out that students in low groups who perceive that it is unlikely that their positions will improve may develop hostile feelings toward the groups as a whole. (Bany and Johnson, 1964).

Goodlad (1984) concluded from a study he conducted that in general in the first three grades, children related their satisfaction and dissatisfaction directly to their perception. He also concluded that the students who liked school best appeared to be more academically oriented. Research also shows that children in the bottom group are likely to perceive themselves as not doing as a result most likely to quit. Goodlad also concluded from his study that students in high track classes saw their teachers as more concerned about them and less punitive toward them than did other students. Students

in low track classes saw their teachers as more punitive and less concerned about them.

A major criticism of ability grouping is that it will lower the self-esteem of students in low ability- groups. Kulik and Kulik (1982) determined that, in general, effects of grouping on self-esteem were very small and somewhat dependent upon program type. Programs with high- average- low groups have a small overall affect on self-esteem, but effects tend to be slightly positive for low- ability groups and slightly negative for high and average ones. There is limited evidence that remedial programs have a positive effect on the self-esteem of slow learners.

Kulik (1985) suggests that labeling (by placement group) may have some transitory impact on self-esteem. Low-ability students may experience feelings of success and competency when in a classroom with others of like ability, and high- ability students may encounter greater competition for the first time.

The thorniest issue concerning grouping and the gifted is whether the gifted are needed in the regular classroom to act

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