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Primary School Studies—No. 8

CHILDREN IN GROUPS



AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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This is Number 8 in a series published by the ACER as a follow-up of a nation-wide Curriculum Survey. Some of the outstanding results of this Survey were published in 1951 in *English and Arithmetic for the Australian Child*. The present series of pamphlets is designed to lead to discussion of problems raised directly or indirectly by the Survey. They are written by a panel of writers drawn from all States. The authors are anonymous but include teachers, inspectors, lecturers in Teachers' Colleges, and members of University Departments of Education. Each author has been left free to express his own view-point, and the views expressed, and ideas expounded, are not necessarily those of the Council. The Discussion Brief enclosed with each pamphlet takes up other points of view and endeavours to centre discussion on some of the major issues touched on in the pamphlet.

The titles of the pamphlets are:

1. *The Approach to Reading*
2. *The Individual Child*
3. *Ends and Means in Arithmetic*
4. *The Appraisal of Results*
5. *Highways of Expression*
6. *The Purposes of Teaching*
7. *Power Over Words*
8. *Children in Groups*
9. *Priorities in the Primary School.*

*In a true profession each practitioner
is at least a potential innovator.*

CHILDREN IN GROUPS

Yesterday Mr Sparks had talked with his class about their projects, and they had decided to do one on the water supply for their town. He had asked them whom they wanted to work with, and was now looking over their answers and trying to arrange the groups which would do different parts of it. Several things disturbed him. He had found it easy to make up four groups of five or six who were close friends, but the others weren't so easy. Even those were all boys or all girls, and he wasn't sure that was the best arrangement in a supposedly co-educational school. Nor was he sure that he should encourage cliques by letting them work together all the time as well as play together. In Marcia's group, he thought that both Ellen and Rae were capable of leading others, but they always seemed to follow Marcia. He had found no-one who wanted to work with Joe or Alan. Mary and Grace had each chosen the other but no-one else had chosen either of them. He pondered the possibilities. Should he cut across the friendship patterns so easily discerned, and form his groups so that the strong helped the weak? Or would it help the weak if he kept them together, so that they would have more confidence amongst their peers in ability? Should he put Joe in a group with two or three others who were close friends, and hope that he could get them to accept Joe and end his social isolation by bringing him into their circle? What was he hoping to get out of the project? If he were concerned only with collecting the maximum amount of information, would it be better to have a bigger number of smaller groups? Would two or three get on better than five or six? He remembered that in his reading periods last year he had found that he could deal with sub-groups of five or six quite easily, letting each group progress at its own pace. But that had been different. There he had quite openly grouped them on the basis of ability, and here he wanted something different. Each one of any group on this project would be doing something different. To get the best out of the scheme each group should have in it good readers, writers, artists, craftsmen, as well as those with more general qualities and capacities. But was he concerned only with information? He had already gone beyond that narrow idea when he thought about leadership qualities in Ellen and Rae, and when he considered Joe would profit socially if he could become a real member of a working group. Mr Sparks bundled the replies together and decided to work out his groupings over the weekend.

Miss Colrad paused at the door of the sixth form classroom and looked inside. She could not see the class teacher until he rose from one of his groups of desks and moved to another. The room was filled with the busy hum of voices. Two or three children seemed to be on the move all the time, but there was a general air of purpose and work about their movement. She remembered Mr Sparks saying at the beginning of the year that he was going to try out new methods of class-grouping, and how much more work and preparation he now seemed to do. She recalled too that it was a common sight now to see small groups of children in his classroom before school began, and after it ended. She wondered how it had worked out, and resolved to ask Mr Sparks more about it. Mr Sparks was only too glad to talk about it because he felt that his work had become this year more satisfying to him, and his children's work certainly far more satisfying to them. He felt too that his experiences this year, with all his difficulties and frustrations in trying out his ideas, were worth making known.

Mr Sparks was not a psychologist. The jargon he occasionally saw in some of the educational journals disgusted him and he made no bones about his belief that much of teaching was merely the application of good sound common-sense relations with his pupils. He did remember, however, that the idea of those relations between pupil and teacher had changed a lot over the last ten years, and that watching his own children growing up had impressed on him their needs for self-expression, their desire for company and co-operation with their fellows, and how often they seemed to blossom out suddenly after some experience in company with their peers. He remembered how his ten-year-old son had amazed them with his knowledge of wireless after he had spent some time messing about in company with friends in a neighbour's workshop. He had been impressed too with the results of his own class project on water supply early this year. That had shown him how much more some of his children could do when thrown on their own resources, or working with their classroom equals, than he had ever anticipated. Seating problems had worried him until he hit on the idea of arranging his desks like a letter U so that six children could sit close together and work on a job. Six was not always the best number, but he found he could easily alter the arrangement when he wanted more or less. Strangely enough, he had more room to move around his class, and the children did not seem so cramped as when the fifty of them sat in the usual row arrangement.

There was, he knew, nothing new in grouping children for project work. He had been worried about some of the children who had not seemed to fit in to any group at all. No-one wanted Mary, although she did not seem to be actually spurned by the other children, but Cyril was still a real problem. He had spoiled the work of three groups he had worked with. Joe on the other hand had developed unexpected qualities. He had a good way with workmen, and had obtained a lot of information from the men busy digging the channels for the irrigation scheme.

The total results from the project were, he knew, very good. It would, he felt sure, be worth experimenting with other subjects. English and Arithmetic occupied half his school work, and there were surely many ways in which he could use the same procedures in those subjects as he used in his Social Studies projects. He had talked it over with some of his friends, and gathered some information about how to deal with these subjects by group methods while down in town for the Christmas vacation. He found, as he partly expected, a lot of theory and not much in the way of reports on successful ventures. That was a challenge to him, and he decided that he would work out his own methods, and make his own decisions about what to treat by class lesson, what by individual methods, and what by group methods. He had found himself hard pressed to work out how to get enough drill work in Arithmetic while still keeping to his group idea. Mensuration, of course, and a good deal of the arithmetic of citizenship, lent themselves admirably to the idea. He had found it useful to be certain that there were always plenty of examples to work out, and if he gave a whole set to a group and let them correct their own answers and find their own errors, he was often amazed at the quantity of work they did. Even the more backward seemed to find a pride in producing correct answers, and their contributions to solving some of the problems he set them often showed an insight he had not expected.

Even Spelling had been tried out successfully, but he had long ago ceased to worry about the grade list of words when he found that his groups, when putting ideas on paper, had become spelling conscious and were not frightened to look up a dictionary or ask him and others how to spell new words. The children still made mistakes, of course, but it was much easier to correct them effectively when they wanted to write the word and were anxious to get it right.

Mr Sparks's experiences are not yet common to a large group of teachers, but the ideas behind them are spreading slowly. It

might be as well therefore to look at the theory underlying them, and to summarize the general results of a good deal of classroom and laboratory experience in working with groups, leaving it to each teacher interested to work out the best ways of applying the theory to his own classroom situation.

MEMBERSHIP OF GROUPS

It is impossible for any of us not to be members of some groups. They may be formal or informal, our membership in them may be imposed on us without our consent or wish, or they may be voluntarily entered. Our membership — of a family, a locality, a nation, a church, a school, a professional body, a political party — has affected and does affect even though it may not entirely determine, many of our needs, most of our wants, and all of our attitudes. Our behaviour cannot be understood without a knowledge of the groups to which we belong.

If this be true, and if it is the business of the teacher to set up the best possible learning environment in the classroom, then it is simple common sense to consider how membership of groups affects our children, and how the techniques of learning in and from groups, which have been so effective with us, can be put to the best use for the children.

THE GROUPS CHILDREN BELONG TO

The teacher deals with his pupils as a group far more frequently than as individuals. This is so whether his role is that of face-to-face guide, or that of adviser and administrator; whether the children are in a small school or a large, cover all possible school ages and grades, or are all approximately the same age and in the one grade; whether they are all of one sex, or both. The group however is fundamentally adult-made. It is not one arising spontaneously from the children themselves, but is determined in almost all its features by ourselves. As citizens we determine the limits of compulsory school attendance, as educational administrators we require or recommend certain forms of organization and grade placement, and as teachers we determine the exact composition of the grade, its sex-ratio, its class seating and its detailed activities.

The children are willy-nilly members of this particular group, and usually accept the fact without question. They do not often show an active interest in making it, on their own initiative, into a group that is tightly bound together by common activities in which they all have a stake, and which arise from their own expressed

wishes. At best it is to them a superficial contact group. Perhaps if you pause for a moment here and consider the organization and activities in your own school and class you may be surprised at the rarity of any activities which have arisen spontaneously from the children themselves.

Most important of all are the spontaneously formed, unorganized groups of friends both in and out of school. In these, free from adult supervision or assistance, the child learns for good or ill to meet his peers with only his own resources to rely on; learns that to belong and be accepted he cannot depart too far from the standards of the group; learns that he can obtain security, and satisfy some of his need for fellowship, amongst freely chosen friends. But he is also a member of many other groups which influence his attitudes, fashion his beliefs, and determine his behaviour at least as much and probably far more than the school group. There is the family where the child first learned how to behave towards other people and from which he still learns most of his attitudes towards adults, towards civic matters, towards economic rewards, towards vocations, and so on. There is the church — for those children for whom school is not one facet of the church — with its emphasis on a spiritual side of living. There are the various organized clubs — Guides, Scouts, ambulance, sports, whose activities are often separate from those of the school, whose aims may be different, and which have the attractions that joining them has been voluntary, their chosen activities are pleasant, and membership can cease at will.

The teacher ignores these groupings at the peril of having the children find much of his work unreal and uninteresting, having no relation to those things they set store by outside school. More importantly, by remaining ignorant of, or ignoring, or neglecting to use in school those same forces and techniques which make the learnings in the non-school groups so vivid and durable, he lessens his own effectiveness as guide and instructor. Perhaps too he denies to himself the right to claim professional competence.

THE CLASSROOM GROUP

The most frequent teaching situation in Australia today is the one in which the teacher faces a mixed class of some thirty-five to sixty girls and boys, all of whom have had approximately the same amount of schooling in the same kinds of schools, and have been exposed to roughly the same kind of teaching of the same courses of study. Fortunately, perhaps, the sameness ends there. One day with such a class and the wise teacher sees it as a collection of

individuals each with a particular pattern of abilities and behaviour. If the reports received by the ACER from teachers about their teaching practices are in any way representative, very few do more than treat their class either as one group, or as a body of individuals each needing some type of special attention. Any sub-grouping that is done is for the purpose of adjusting instruction, or work, to the ability of the sub-group. In this, of course, teachers are following the recommendations of the courses of study, which advise sub-grouping on the basis of ability or attainment in order to attain more effective mastery of the prescribed content of the courses studied. The tremendous value of using the give and take between children in small groups for educational purposes is almost completely ignored as yet in our professional publications. The idea of using the wide range of talents in the class to assist in its working is rarely entertained and more rarely used. The even more fundamental value of using, to aid the children to learn, the forces that inevitably arise in a group working together, is still not widely realized, and only a few bold and skilful teachers have found how to achieve it.

To the teacher, this mixed class is a group. He sees it as a group all the time — as *his* group, even when most aware of the diversity of its members. But how do John, sitting half-way back in the second row from the windows, and Mary, three seats away in the next row, see it? Occasionally, for certain, as a unit — as Class 5, or Form I, or Wosbee School, or whatever the unit is. Physically, they belong to it. They share its local habitations and its name. But does it mean to them anything more than that? Do they feel deeply that it is a group they *want* to belong to, to which they feel *emotionally* tied, from which *they* draw the delights of companionship, the strength of co-operation, and the security of belonging? Strenuous attempts are sometimes made to create such a group feeling by competition with the other grades in tidiness, by special items in a school display, by class contributions to a school magazine, by grade or form concerts for a common objective, even, on occasions, by moral exhortation or by decree. What is the quality of the group feeling that is developed? How often are the goals towards which the class works, dictated or advised, or otherwise imposed? How deeply do the children become involved in the class activity? Often, of course, the attempts are successful on almost all worthwhile counts — efficiency, spontaneity, participation, enthusiasm, self-respect, toleration of differences. The same comments can be made about self-government in schools. Apart from the training and experience it gives in social and civic techniques, it creates, if

properly used, situations in which pupils become personally involved, allows them to choose their own goals and work to achieve them, commits them to actions and purposes arising from their own interests. The amazing thing is that the obvious lessons from the success of these attempts are not widely applied in the classroom to the business of acquiring content and attitudes from classroom materials.

THE EFFECTS OF GROUPS

Not all children can join effectively in working with others. Some obviously need encouragement, experience, a change in attitude. Nor can all teachers work well except in the two situations described earlier — the class lesson or the individual work plan. The idea of allowing the class to form into groups to get jobs done is not an easy one to accept. The evidence available at present suggests that if we compare the work done in good groups with the work done by the same children, or similar ones, when not organized in groups:

1. The quality of the work is higher.
2. The children are more likely to be self-critical, and less likely to be critical of others.
3. The total amount of work done is greater.
4. Resistance to change is more readily overcome in an individual if his group changes. New learning is accelerated. This is particularly important in all matters of social education.
5. More use is made of individual abilities. Self-esteem and a sense of worth are developed in all children.
6. Group members learn more, because they become personally involved in discovery, discussion, decision and the action taken. There is greater desire to complete a job once it is begun.
7. There is more friendliness, more co-operation, more tolerance, more spontaneous approval of others, more receptiveness to others' ideas, and a more rapid development of responsibility to others.

This is not only the evidence of laboratory studies with specially formed groups, but of teachers who have used such methods in subjects like English Expression, Social Studies, Reading. There is no valid reason why many topics in all subjects should not be treated in this way.

The two last points in this list are worth some attention. Those teachers who have tried to assess the opportunities available to them, under the common classroom organization, to develop all the desirable character traits mentioned in their course of study,

are often surprised at how few there are for each individual child. The use of the small sub-group in the classroom multiplies the chances for each child to get practice in behaving according to those traits — learning therefore by doing.

There seems little doubt that if the class-group, which usually has rather stereotyped habits of work and modes of response, can be arranged in small work groups in which the children work co-operatively and not in competition with or independently of each other, the total result will be better than under the more usual methods of class organization.

THE TEACHER'S PLACE WITH SUCH GROUPS

This does not mean that the teacher abdicates his position as guide and instructor. These roles remain with him, but they are greatly expanded. His role of guide towards those attitudes we consider democratic becomes much more important. To handle it effectively, he must be convinced of their value and have thought out the question of the origin and nature of his own authority. As an instructor he must add to his knowledge and techniques a high degree of insight into how groups function, and how they affect and are in turn affected by individual personalities. He becomes the acknowledged expert both in subjects and procedures; he becomes a consultant in group activities. As he moves from group to group he gives advice, makes suggestions, is a mediator between extremes, ensures that all sides of a discussion are heard, acts as a judicial model, and corrects errors and omissions of fact. It is not easy work. It is, in fact, exacting, since the teacher has to be alert to the expression of many more personalities than in the more normal classroom lesson. He must know far more about each child — his background, experience, capacities, deficiencies and needs than is required in a class lesson. He must be prepared to share in the work, not to boss it. When failure occurs, as it is bound to, he interprets the failure and suggests ways to prevent it recurring. (Failure does not mean individual frustration in these circumstances.) Yes, it is exacting, but it has the qualities of professional work and not of a skilled trade. It is doubly hard for those who were themselves educated in other ways, who have been trained more specifically in the technique of the class lesson and who have taught in the traditional way. To change classroom techniques so that the emphasis is on group work and not on individual or class tuition will upset many ideas and mean new habits of thought as well as work. This, quite frankly, is the biggest objection to it, to be answered only by appeal to the results aimed at.

Not all classroom time can be spent in group work. There is still a lot of hard individual work to do. But the value of doing this work in relation to a need that has arisen in the work of a group with which the child has fully identified himself, is that the work is seen as essential to give an effective answer to a problem, not as something arbitrarily imposed from outside the child.

ACHIEVING THE BEST RESULTS WITH GROUPS

If groups are to achieve the best results they must be small. There are limits for even the most socially absorbent person — limits to the number of others with whom we can co-operate fully. By “fully” is meant listening to and understanding their view-points, perceiving them as persons and not as ciphers, accepting them as individuals and grasping their contributions to the work of the group. Even a small group must include a variety of talents so that each member contributes something to the work, and none feels unable to contribute. As any group increases in size, the diffusion of attention of the members becomes greater. It is almost a corollary that dependence on one leader to direct the activities of the group becomes greater, and members tolerate more interventions by the leader. There is, too, less time for consideration of each individual contribution, and the need for self-expression is lessened. These experiences will be familiar to everyone who has belonged to committees: it is a useful and salutary exercise to apply their lessons to the classroom.

They must be directed, or organized, so that their working habits arise spontaneously from their own discussions and problems; and the children are *encouraged* to make their own suggestions. Neither too much direction, nor too little, is as effective as the situation in which the group works on a problem acceptable to the teacher (probably suggested by him, or arising out of a subject skilfully chosen for group discussion) with the teacher co-operating in the work when asked for assistance, and offering advice in difficulties, but not imposing his methods of work. It is essential for the group members to feel that the problem is theirs, that they can solve it, that they are responsible for their own efforts, that it is as much from their suggestions as anyone else's that their goal will be quickly reached. Such a group is always more tightly knit together than one which is over-directed or left too much to itself. It has, in a well-known phrase, a “consciousness of kind”. The very closeness of the links in the group makes for co-operation, and helps to avoid periods of slackness. The work habits of such a group, too, are not dependent on the presence of the teacher or other

leader. Their productivity is likely to be much higher in the absence of the teacher than that of a less well-integrated group. (This raises the question of discipline and the relative values of teacher-centred and group-centred discipline, and the following quotation from a study in self-government is worth pondering over. "As enforcement of the necessary regulations and prohibitions was taken over more and more by the group itself, the staff members ceased to be regarded primarily as disciplinarians, who were to be outwitted, placated, or harassed, as the occasions might demand; and the total number of infractions which had to be dealt with decreased at a remarkable rate.")

It is worth remembering that the general atmosphere in which the group works is very dependent on the teacher. It is not only the kind of person he is that matters, but the way he behaves and the help he gives. Too much freedom can produce only confusion, lack of purpose, frustration; too much control can produce either apathy and uncreativity or hostility and destructiveness. The ideal atmosphere for our groups is the one that produces willing co-operation, a "we" feeling rather than an "I" feeling, a creative will to achieve results — with others, and not despite or in opposition to them — one in which the child works well because he wants to reach a standard he has helped to set.

Because the role played by the teacher in a classroom is to help each child to get as much as possible from the school, he must be concerned with those children who do not readily join with their fellows. These are not always the dull. The bright child can be as isolated from social acceptance by his class fellows as is the dull. It is sometimes difficult to incorporate such individuals into a group and achieve good group results. It is, of course, essential for such children to learn to participate in group work. Often the causes of the isolation have to be discovered before the child can be brought into effective association with a group. It is often the measure of a teacher's skill in handling children that these individuals are known and that positive steps are being taken to end the isolation. Working with a group in a congenial atmosphere where any contribution is received and considered is often the first step towards a better social adjustment for such pupils. It is instructive to ask the children in a class (provided the answers are going to be used for the purpose of forming such groups) with whom they would like to work on a particular project — preferably one chosen by the class after discussion. A simple tabulation of the answers will show the relative popularity of the children very quickly. An alert teacher can use such information in the best interests of all the children by arranging

his groups with this knowledge in mind. It is not always best to have close friends working together.

DANGERS IN GROUP WORK

Some of the dangers that beset group work must be recognized. If a group does not understand its task, or is unable to find out how to do it, a sense of frustration quickly develops which destroys any value it has for its members. Both these possibilities can be met either by a general class discussion before the task is begun, or by careful guidance of the group so that it defines its task in its own words, and knows where to look for expert assistance if needed.

There can well be a feeling that the work being done is unimportant. This can easily happen if the group has not felt that it has had some say in the work it is doing. It is not an attitude peculiar to groups. Teachers could well ask themselves how important to the pupils is the work they at present ask them to do. The teacher may be satisfied with its importance, but do the children feel that it is important? There will almost certainly be a wide gulf between the teacher's estimates of importance and those of most of the children. The skilful teacher shows the relevance of school work to a pupil's problem or to the larger society, or can show how it is related to the work of the whole class group, and how that in turn is important.

Not all individuals behave in the same way. However valuable the group work, it can be expected that the shirker and the dictator will both be found. Some children, adepts at personal relations at an early age, already know how best to deal with these individuals, but the teacher cannot rely on this. He can either intervene tactfully himself, or perhaps suggest that the group appoints an observer who can say how much each member is contributing. We all know the dominant member of a committee who often gets in the first speech and overawes others who have a contribution that should be made. This situation is a common one in child groups, and it is often necessary for the teacher to use the observer's data to show that such a person is not letting the group give of its best. At other times, the teacher can suggest positively that someone else in a group can contribute to a discussion, or do effectively a piece of work. The best group work is done when all the members feel free to make contributions. These contributions may or may not be accepted by the others, but provided they can be made in a group that does not treat them as good or bad because of the person who made them, the children will feel much freer to make suggestions, to experiment with ideas, to express doubts, and to admit ignorance. This latter

point is very important. If a child can face ignorance without shame, or admit failure without feeling threatened in some way (in how many classrooms is this the case?) then he can be brought to look at his own abilities and weaknesses quite frankly. It is then often far easier to remedy the latter.

It is not good that sub-groups should be permanent. If they are, then inter-group competition develops which can be undesirable. The individual, too, if his sub-group is of a permanent nature, tends to be too emotionally dependent on it, and too little ready to stand on his own feet. At all times they should be flexible, capable of adding to, or dropping from, their members. They should, too, change from time to time as new problems arise, new skills are needed, and new leaders appear.

Not all groups will be equally effective. Since they are composed of individuals, their effectiveness is largely determined by the quality and experience of their members. The child has always other loyalties than those to the school, other interests than those of the classroom. Some part of him is probably always "psychologically on holiday". The teacher will learn to sense these facts, adapt his expectations to the quality of his group, and choose the techniques he suggests to them in the light of his knowledge of the group.

There will be occasions, with the best teachers and the best techniques, even when the groups are skilfully chosen and have begun work with enthusiasm, when boredom, apathy or apparent disorder will appear. These are to be expected. They will not arise because the children are suddenly "bad" or "unco-operative" or "impudent" or "undisciplined". The skilful teacher will have foreseen the occasion and be ready with a change of activity, a variation of the roles the children are playing, or even, if he considers the occasion needs some form of therapy, with a scheme whereby the children can discuss what has happened, pick out faults in the procedures and decide how to overcome them. Children can, and should, be led to see why and how a group works well or badly. It is essential that they come to realize the different roles members of their groups play at different times — such as expert, consultant, mediator, practical applier, generalizer, creator of ideas, foreseer of consequences, and so on.

Any teacher changing over from the rather rigid form of classroom organization to the more flexible sub-grouping organization can expect to have a period of apparent disorganization, even perhaps of temporary decline in quality and decrease in quantity of work done. Freedom is a heady beverage, and in discovering both the extent of their own powers and the limits of their self-

determination, children may be noisy, too expressive and too discursive in their discussions. These are the birth-pangs of a new life, to be expected and borne with the benefits of the future in prospect.

It is not suggested that a class divided into groups working in the above ways is as easy to administer as the one which works as a unit or as a number of individuals. It is obvious, for example, that a child working happily in a group — either in discussion or in physical activity — is not as much teacher-centred as one who is doing a job required by the teacher, or listening to a class lesson, or joining in a class discussion. That, of course, is better for both pupil and teacher, so long as the group is moving towards the right goals. The fact that the class meets as a group only when the work requires it makes of those meetings a more vivid experience in which learning is more likely to take place. Its strength as a class is greater because its members have developed their individual skills through group work, and its knowledge and capacities are improved by the multitude of contributions flowing from individuals. These things are surely more important than administrative ease and organizing convenience.

To summarize briefly, these things seem necessary if a group is to work well:

1. It must be doing definite work for a purpose known to, and accepted by, each child in the group.
2. Each child must feel that he can help to achieve the purpose.
3. The purpose itself must satisfy some need perceived by each child as important.
4. The purpose must be a realistic one, within the capacity of the children.
5. The children can see that they are making progress.
6. The children see the value of their individual contributions while seeing themselves as a group with a common purpose.
7. There is no feeling of competition with other children in the group, or inequality in gain or sacrifice.

Working with groups in these ways is a challenge that calls for all the personal qualities, technical skills, and knowledge of children and their behaviour that the teacher has or can obtain. Discussions about its possibilities, trial with it, and exchange of experiences in using it as a classroom procedure, ought to improve considerably the progress the school makes towards the goals which society expects it to achieve in imparting knowledge and skills and developing desirable social habits and attitudes.

CHILDREN IN GROUPS

Primary School Studies No. 8

DISCUSSION BRIEF

The fourth class in _____ School has fifty-five children on its roll. The Head regards it as an average grade. It has the usual scatter of abilities in all subjects. Its teacher has had ten years' experience since leaving Teacher's College. He has most of the University subjects he needs for a first degree, and has had six years' experience in charge of small schools before coming to his present position as assistant master. The class is organized in different ways for most of its work. In broad outline the organization for English is:

Reading

Six sub-divisions based on ability as assessed by the teacher after using ACER tests and the library loan records of the children. The teacher helps each group to choose reading material it likes, and is careful to see that each member reads, and understands what he reads.

Study of Literature

Mostly done in class lessons. A free period is given once a fortnight in which children read individually. The class has twelve sub-groups, each group preparing an anthology of poems, or collecting descriptions by well known writers, of a subject chosen by the group: Two of the subjects are Ships and Trees. The teacher decided on the membership of the sub-groups in Reading, but left the children to make their own choices for the Anthology sub-groups.

Expression Work

This is dealt with in three ways. For speech training the work done is mostly individual, although there is also verse speaking done by the groups mentioned in connection with the Anthology. For oral expression, most of the work is done in groups working on specific jobs, not only in English, but in all subjects. For instance, when the class was doing long multiplication last week, it divided itself into groups of three. (The teacher tactfully combined good and less good arithmeticians in these groups, which did not

usually have close friends in them. Some of the shy children came out of their shells in this work.) Each group found actual examples of long multiplication in the lives of their parents or friends, chose one of these examples, and a spokesman for the group then explained to the class what the problem was, how it came up, and how the answer was obtained. Whenever a question was asked, one of the other two had to answer it. In written work, the class is at present working on a magazine for Christmas, and its editorial committee, after a long class discussion, has decided to allot tasks to various groups and individuals. Mary, for example, is doing a design for the cover. Tom and Joe are writing up the results of the football matches the class played during winter. A small group of girls is describing a picnic they arranged in the last holidays.

1. This class is, externally, quite a typical one for Australian towns or cities. Its internal organization is *not* typical.

- (a) In such a class, what difficulties would you expect to arise in administration and discipline? Are these insuperable?
- (b) What effect is this organization likely to have on standards of attainment?
- (c) Do you agree with the idea that such sub-divisions assist in the work of the class?
- (d) Which method of sub-division is in your opinion the best? That based on ability, that based on pupils' choices, or that having a judicious mixture of pupil-choice and teacher-selection?
- (e) What criteria would you use in deciding on the size of the sub-divisions in various aspects of the work of the class? For example, what is the optimum size of a group doing exercises in measurement of the playground, or preparing scenery for a classroom play?

2. Considerable use is made of sub-groups in most infant classes. What principles are used in deciding

- (a) size of groups?
- (b) type of work done?
- (c) choice of members for these groups?

Are these same principles applicable to grades higher in the school? Does the pamphlet suggest other principles which might supplement those in use?

3. Do you think the use of groups should be confined only to Social Studies? What values do you expect to gain, in a project, by dividing your class into groups? Can similar values be obtained by using the method in other subjects?

4. There is little opportunity to establish peer groups in small rural schools. What sort of groupings take place spontaneously in such schools? On what aspects of school work can co-operative activity be fostered in the small schools?

5. What effect would you expect group work, of the type suggested, to have on

(a) the child who is over-dependent on his fellows?

(b) the child who is over-dominant of his fellows?

6. The pamphlet leaves the impression that the best goals are those the children see as "good". Do you agree with this? To what extent are our aims and goals understood by children?

7. If a class is to work co-operatively, suggestions must come from individuals and be accepted by all. Is there any difference between a suggestion by a teacher and one by a child?