ABILITY GROUPING IN SECONDARY ENGLISH

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ABILITY GROUPING IN SECONDARY ENGLISH

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the North Texas State College in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

211815
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Denton, Texas

August, 1952
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CHAPTER I

THE NEED FOR ABILITY GROUPING

One of the logical and functional outgrowths of the present-day emphasis upon individual differences of pupils engaged in the learning process is the practice of ability grouping, which, in brief, is

... a system of grouping in which pupils are separated into sections according to their general ability or their competence in a given field of study; usually determined in academic subjects, on the basis of school marks or the results of standardized tests of intelligence and achievement, or a combination of the two, other measures and indexes of ability being used in nonacademic fields.¹

In short, ability grouping can be defined as "the act or procedure of dividing the pupils of a class into two or more groups on the basis of interest or ability, for the purpose of adapting instruction."²

Historical Backgrounds

Although ability grouping is a so-called modern development in education, its origin dates back to 1870, when a plan was set up in St. Louis to avoid needless repetition of the educational fundamentals on the part of bright pupils. The plan, in brief, called for grading the entire school system on the basis of quarter-year intervals to facilitate

² Ibid.
special promotions for those children who were ready for more advanced work. 3

In 1837, Elizabeth, New Jersey, began to divide each grade into three or four sections on the basis of similar attainments. Each section within a grade did as much work as it could, and individual pupils within a section were freely promoted into the next higher section whenever they demonstrated their readiness for a higher level of work. 4

In 1891, the school system of Cambridge, Massachusetts, developed its famous so-called "double-track" plan, which operated in the elementary grades. Average and below-average pupils worked along one "track" calling for careful instruction and individual guidance to enable them to master the fundamentals, whereas more capable pupils were in other classes providing for varied and enriched learning experiences and permitting them to advance through the elementary grades as rapidly as their work justified promotion. 5

The school system of Denver, Colorado, developed in 1895 what was probably the first serious attempt to provide enrichment courses for bright pupils. When such individuals had mastered the required subject matter, they were permitted to work at elective studies during

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4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p. 25.
their spare time in school; and pupils won promotion by subject-matter areas rather than by grade. 6

In 1901, a plan of individual instruction was introduced in Pueblo, Colorado, allowing each pupil to proceed at his own rate, which meant that a class was broken up into a number of units. The efforts of the teacher were directed toward bringing forward the slow or dull pupils. The plan failed because of prohibitive cost and because too much emphasis was placed upon boosting the backward, sometimes to the neglect of others in the group. 7

Newton, Massachusetts, in 1914, developed a plan for placing unassigned teachers in special rooms to which pupils in need of assistance could go for help. Thus the plan provided for individual counseling and personal instruction for those who needed these specialized procedures. 8

In Winnetka, Illinois, a plan has been in use for a number of years which provides for a system of achievement units allowing the pupil to cover the ground rapidly without danger of superficial learning experiences. He measures his own progress by means of standardized achievement tests. 9

Dalton, Massachusetts, developed in 1919 a plan which has become one of the best known and most widely copied systems of individualized instruction ever devised. The five main features of the plan are monthly

6 Ibid., p. 26. 7 Ibid., p. 27. 8 Ibid. 9 Ibid., p. 28.
assignments, freedom of study, freedom of progress, individual instruction, and group creativeness. The work for the entire year is planned in advance, but the pupil may take an examination at the end of each month, or oftener if he has completed a specific unit. The teacher's functions are also five in number: to preserve an atmosphere conducive to study and creative activity; to explain the details of the assignments; to give information about equipment and its use when necessary; to give suggestions about methods of work; and to explain the problem in full whenever this may become necessary for the clarification of its fundamental purposes and anticipated outcomes. Every pupil works at his own rate of speed, and it has become an established fact that the pupil is to be promoted in accordance with his attainment, without regard to time elements. No failures, no disciplinary problems, and no squandering of time can be charged against the Dalton plan.¹⁰

Many other plans for ability grouping have, of course, appeared from time to time, but the ones mentioned above are typical of the many that have grown up in all sections of the country.

Basis for Demand for Ability Grouping

At this point it becomes necessary to examine the rationale of such plans for the grouping of children in educational situations:

¹⁰Ibid., p. 29.
The grouping of children presupposes that the educational objectives of the school will be better realized by this means. Thus, the basis upon which grouping is accomplished reflects the theory of the educational system. Early attempts at grouping reflected the theory of formal discipline, with drill and recitation as methods and subject-matter mastery as the objective. With the advent of newer theories and recognition of individual differences in rate of learning there came new attempts at grouping such as graded schools with rapid or delayed promotion, promotion by subjects, parallel sections and courses of study. In time this grouping came to be based upon academic achievement or intelligence as determined by scientific tests. Grouping has thus come to have as its objective the placement of each individual within a group in which he will work better, where he will have a sense of belonging and status, and where his mental health will be safeguarded and improved.\(^{11}\)

Today, the American public school has to take care of all of the children except those relatively few unfortunates who are so severely handicapped in mental development that the school has nothing to offer them. The fact that all children now come to school necessitates ability grouping. The cost of individualized instruction is prohibitive in the sense that each child is taught specially and separately. Grouping, on the other hand, is economical in that it saves the time of teachers and at the same time promotes both the academic learning and the social development of the children.\(^{12}\) In earlier days, as a rule, only the more gifted children attended school long enough to enter the secondary grades; and for this reason the problem of grouping was solved

\(^{11}\)B. Othanel Smith and A. J. Dolio, "Recent Developments in Grouping," *Educational Leadership*, IV (April, 1947), 403.

more or less automatically because of economic and social pressures that removed many of the children from school after their first few years of attendance. Today, however, increasingly large numbers of children of all stages of mental development are attending secondary schools, and efforts must therefore be made to place them in homogeneous groups in which their educational development will be most advantageously promoted. This implies, of course, careful and scientific study of each pupil before he is placed in any group.

In the United States more liberal provisions are made for the education of all youth than in any other country; and here in America the emphasis is coming to be more and more upon the conception of all—bright and dull, rich and poor. Schooling is now provided for a larger percentage of the total population than ever before in American history, to the extent that it is now estimated that fully one fourth of the total population is "enrolled in educational institutions. "The general acceptance of the high school as democracy's agency for bringing secondary school education to all the children of all the people, regardless of racial, political, or economic differences among parents, has been most encouraging."13

With this increased emphasis upon education for all children, the population of the classroom consequently has become more varied and

distinctly heterogeneous. The child of average intelligence, and even the one approaching imbecility, is associated in common learning situations with the children possessing high intelligence quotients. At the same time, the classroom in the public school will contain children from homes of poverty, homes of middle-class economic status, and homes of wealth. In the light of the democratic philosophy which now permeates American education to a greater degree than ever before, differences in social and economic status are of no significance in the public schools, which strive to inculcate, in all, such principles of democracy as will enable them to live effectively in a modern democratic society.

As a consequence of this democratic spirit, it is now widely recognized in educational circles that teaching and learning procedures should be adjusted to the ability of the individual learner to profit satisfactorily from such situations. It readily follows, then, that the child of average or low mentality cannot receive as much benefit from a fixed program of instruction as may be derived by the child with superior intelligence. The fundamental philosophy of ability grouping, therefore, implies that children shall be divided into groups according to their competence, and that methods of instruction shall be varied to meet the needs and abilities of the various groups, in order that all pupils may receive the greatest possible benefit from their educational experiences.
One of the most conspicuous evidences of the genius of America is found in this country's capacity for many kinds of mass production. Even the public schools have come to operate according to a mass-production technique. They deal with millions of pupils and represent an investment of billions of dollars. Mass industrial production has undoubtedly promoted the welfare of the American people; yet, advances in all areas of life depend to a very substantial degree upon the insight and vision of a relatively few exceptionally capable persons. In our concern that opportunities available to the millions shall be improved, we must not fail to make provisions for those who can bring about still greater improvement in our society.

There is abundant evidence that the American public school system is tragically neglecting, to an alarming degree, the greatest resource of the nation—gifted children and youth. If the educational program is geared to the needs of the average child—as is largely true—the child with superior ability experiences boredom, frustration, and a curbing of his natural abilities to forge ahead of the majority of the group. Thus his superior ability, in the course of years of non-stimulation, may eventually be lost until he, too, possesses only average or mediocre capabilities. By the same token, the child of average or low mentality is unable to profit from learning situations

developed for the benefit of the superior child. Thus, if both groups are subjected to the same program of instruction, it follows that one or the other will not be adequately challenged, and the process of education will become boredom, frustration, and failure. When, however, each group is given instruction suited to his needs, abilities, and interests, each can make satisfactory progress in an educational program that will prove practical and developmental for each individual child.

Professional writing dealing with this phase of secondary-school organization, although voluminous, has been confined almost entirely to homogeneous or ability grouping. While these two terms are often employed interchangeably and synonymously, writers in the field are now tending to restrict their meaning. Technically, homogeneous grouping is usually thought of as the classification of pupils according to interests, needs, and purposes. Ability grouping, on the other hand, is usually given a much narrower meaning and refers to the formation of groups on the basis of ability to do the work and for the improvement of classroom instruction. The practice of utilizing ability grouping on the basis of whole class sections as well as within class sections has received widespread acceptance. 15

Even as long ago as 1932, the results of the National Survey of Secondary Education indicated that about a third of the high schools of the country utilized some form of homogeneous grouping. As was to be expected, this plan of grouping was to be found more frequently in reorganized than in traditionally organized high schools, and was more prevalent in large than in small high schools, in academic than in commercial and vocational subjects, and in commercial subjects than in other non-academic subjects.

A considerable number and variety of bases have been employed for grouping. The National Survey of Secondary Education revealed that sixteen different bases in a wide variety of combinations were the fundamental principles underlying the practice of grouping. The seven most frequently reported of these bases for grouping, listed according to their frequency, were as follows: intelligence quotient determined by means of group mental tests; scholarship marks in all subjects combined; industry; average of several teachers' ratings of pupil's academic ability or intelligence; scholarship marks in a particular subject or in related subjects; and teachers' estimates of pupil's general ability. Approximately eighty-five per cent of the high schools of the nation employ more than one criterion as a basis for ability grouping. 16

Advantages and Disadvantages of Ability Grouping

Ability grouping, in its simplest aspect, is merely a refinement of classification. It is a process of classifying the pupils of the school or of the grade into groups which, within reasonable limitations, are homogeneous in their ability to perform the kinds of tasks which confront the pupils in the various learning situations within the classroom. The "ability" which is the proper basis for grouping cannot be thought of as identical with the rating obtained from the administration of any test. It is rather the sum total of the child's equipment for dealing with the problems which constitute the established task of the school. If ability is looked upon as including all of the factors which reside within the child—including the elusive elements of temperament, health, and character—the closest index to his real ability is his very performance. 17

In 1930, Lamson conducted a study to determine the advisability of permitting children with high-ranking intelligence quotients to enter high school several years younger than their classmates with average or low intelligence quotients. Although a number of bases of comparison were utilized, the experiment revealed that, regardless of the angle from which the gifted group was compared with the control group, the record of achievement for the gifted children was superior

to the achievement of the individuals with average or low intelligence ratings. Hendricks also has written emphatically in support of the need for making special provisions for the superior high-school pupil, and has suggested procedures for meeting that need, with particular reference to the small high school in which ability grouping usually cannot be brought about through the organization of separate sections, but instead must be confined to small groups selected from within a given section.

It is generally admitted that the leveling tendency of democracy has created a problem in American public education. Of this paradox Dewey has said, "Democracy has been unjust to the gifted student." Our political philosophy has announced equality of creation; our educational philosophy has translated this concept into equality of opportunity.

One student of the techniques of grouping wrote a book in 1929 the purpose of which was stated by the author:

... Under normal prevailing conditions, do first-year high-school pupils of the same age, sex, intelligence score, and taught by the same teacher, in English and algebra, gain more as measured by standardized achievement tests and semester marks in homogeneous groups than they do in heterogeneous groups?

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18 Edna Emma Lamson, *A Study of Young Gifted Children in Senior High School*, pp. 73-75.


20 Fay Adams and Walker Brown, *Teaching the Bright Pupil*, p. 86.

21 T. Luther Purdom, *The Value of Homogeneous Grouping*, p. 36.
The answer to this question emerged in definite form as a result of the careful investigation conducted. Since the answer was strongly affirmative, the author then pointed out the following advantages which he had noted for homogeneous grouping in the course of his experiment:

1. Such grouping makes possible more rapid progress of the bright pupils.

2. It offers an opportunity to adapt teaching methods to the different levels of intelligence.

3. It creates more rivalry and causes the pupils to put forth better efforts.

4. It makes the teacher's work more interesting, much easier, and more fruitful.

5. It eliminates many problems of discipline.

6. It reduces the number of failures.

7. It discourages the dull pupils less than if they were members of a heterogeneous group.

8. It makes possible an enriched curriculum.

The editor of the Elementary School Journal has listed the following seven advantages to be expected from homogeneous grouping of pupils, all of which are somewhat closely related to the advantages cited above, although there are enough differences in the two lists to warrant the inclusion of both:
1. Slow learners in separate groups are not discouraged by the superiority of others but compete on more equal terms and develop their own leaders. Grouped together, pupils feel freer to admit their slowness and to ask the questions necessary to their better understanding of materials and processes. They are not made to feel awkward or timid through being conscious of the attainments of brighter and faster pupils.

2. Homogeneous grouping provides the teacher with a better opportunity to know his pupils. In mixed classes the brighter pupils are apt to usurp too much of the attention of the teacher.

3. Grouping places pupils in competition with others of fairly equal ability. It sets a pace that is a real challenge and points toward a standard that is attainable.

4. Children possessing more than average ability tend to form habits of idleness, inattention, and mental laziness when they are compelled to "mark time" in classes made up of average and below-average pupils. But when superior pupils are grouped together, activities and discussions are on a higher plane, which challenges their best efforts and removes the danger of frustration and indifference.

5. In groups of children possessing similar capabilities, competition is keener, and pupils are more likely to work up to the limit of their potentialities.
6. Leaders are developed in all groups. Every homogeneous group lacks enough in homogeneity to furnish leaders for the slower portion of the group, without the danger of the leaders getting so far ahead that they cease to function as such. Even in the slow groups the skillful teacher is able to develop leaders—pupils who can analyze the situation, devise the proper line of action, and lead or direct their fellow-pupils in the solution of problems within their grasp.

7. Homogeneous grouping prevents the development of a superiority complex on the part of the brighter pupils. It is possible that a better attitude toward his own ability may result if a pupil is matched with his peers in learning situations. 22

The use of ability grouping or homogeneous grouping has become a popular method for adjusting the individual differences within a given grade level. This procedure recognizes the fact that all children who are promoted into a particular grade are not of equal ability, and it therefore divides them into several groups on the basis, usually, of a combined criterion of intelligence quotient and general school achievement.

When the value of group classification is recognized and accepted, the task then becomes one of selecting the measure of native ability or acquired skill which will afford the most accurate results in the

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classification of pupils. It is necessary to utilize some method which will group the pupils into homogeneous sections so that one type of instruction may be used for all of the pupils in any one section. Here, of course, lies a major problem. When the same group of pupils are subjected to various methods of classification for the purpose of comparing the results of such grouping, practical difficulties are often encountered. The best that can be done is to form groups that are as nearly homogeneous as possible, according to a standard selected for its apparent soundness as a guide for the formation of such groups.

Something of the value of paying particular attention to gifted children in the school is implied in the following statement:

It is generally the group of individuals of great ability who, in the long run and as a group, will be the least selfish, the least likely to monopolize the good things in this world, and by their inventions and discoveries, by their creative work in the arts, by their contributions to government and social reform, by their activities in all fields, will in the future help humanity in its struggle upward toward a better civilization.

This being the case, the practice of homogeneous grouping, if prevalent in the schools, will serve to prepare these individuals for assuming positions of more effective leadership. If they are given opportunities to exercise their superior abilities and creative interests while in school, such productive efforts on their part can be expected to continue

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23 Stanley S. Marzolf, "Classification of High School Students," School and Society, XXXII (December 27, 1930), 381.

24 Rudolph Pintner, "Superior Ability," Teachers College Record, XLII (February, 1941), 419.
as they leave school and take their places in the adult community. At the same time that this select group is developing its abilities to the utmost, those individuals of lesser ability will also be preparing themselves for more effective citizenship and for the making of their own worth-while contributions for the welfare of society.

In fact, there is perhaps not adequate justification for providing superior educational advantages for particular groups of pupils unless this education will be utilized for the welfare of the whole population. For this reason, civic responsibility should be emphasized and special educational facilities should be provided, with the understanding that bright children will render greater service for the common good if they are thus given, early in life, a feeling of responsibility to utilize their capacities for the welfare of all people. In the final analysis, only in this manner can the aims of democratic education be realized, for modern education has for its pre-eminent goal the development of effective citizens for a democratic society.

Much of the discussion of educational grouping centers today upon two principles: (1) the importance of recognizing and meeting individual needs and (2) the desirability of advancing mutual understanding and co-operative effort among persons and groups. The problem of grouping is the problem of a particular school or department, of a

particular group of teachers and administrators, for a plan that is highly effective in one situation may be a failure in another. It is logical to look upon a change in educational practice as worth-while if that change has a reasonable chance of stirring more interest and of bringing about more meaningful and pertinent experiences in the lives of pupils than can be provided by the practice that it is to displace. Conversely, it is sane to regard a change as not worth the making if, for any reason, it does not promise appreciable enrichment of pupils' experiences. A change to grouping, therefore, should not be undertaken merely because it appears to be a current "fad," but it must be justified by the prospect of better educational opportunities and attainments. 26

At the same time it should be recognized that the advantages to be hoped for from the homogeneous grouping of children in learning situations lie not so much in the expectation of greater achievement in the tool subjects as in an enrichment of scholastic experience with additional intellectual opportunities and challenges for all groups. 27

In other words, grouping makes possible such practical learning situations as will contribute much to educational progress, regardless

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of the ability level at which the individual pupil may be placed as a result of careful classification.

In a study conducted by Wilson, a questionnaire was sent to state and city school superintendents and to colleges and universities, responses to which substantiated the following conclusions concerning gifted children: (1) there is a strongly felt need for curricular materials, specially trained teachers, and more information about the nature of gifted children; (2) findings already established concerning gifted children have not been adequately utilized by school people; and (3) the needs that are evident apparently are not recognized by teacher-training institutions. 28 Doubtless all of these conclusions are valid, and doubtless further study and progressive action are sorely needed, that education may receive the greatest possible benefit from improved theories and practices in teaching and learning.

Research has strongly indicated that it is a fatal mistake in dealing with superior pupils not to press them at every stage to the limit of their capabilities. If this is not done, boredom and indifference may result, and the excess energy and mental ability not consumed in challenging educational experiences may break out into disciplinary problems. On the other hand, when the superior child is constantly faced with

problems and challenges to bring out his best thought and effort, he will continue working steadily and progressively toward the solution of the situations that confront him. "When this condition is achieved, the aspiring pupil will soon set the pace for the perspiring teacher." 29

A committee composed of teachers of English in New York City has defined three kinds of "honor" classes: (1) those consisting of students generally gifted in English; (2) those organized in some special field in English and consisting of pupils particularly gifted in that field; and (3) those classes organized in English in an honor school and consisting of pupils who are generally gifted or superior. The committee has justified the practice of selective grouping on the grounds that it fosters individual growth and development and promotes cooperative effort and wholesome group feeling. 30 Special plans have been put into operation in the schools of New York City to provide especially for the needs of gifted children with relation to the organization of special groups with common interests, needs, and abilities; the enrichment of the curriculum to challenge the interest and effort of these superior children; the development of new techniques of teaching and learning which seem especially appropriate for these pupils; and the organization of special administrative and instructional

29 C. W. Raubicheck, "The Reading of Superior High-school Pupils," *English Journal*, XXIX (September, 1940), 542.

units for promoting the educational progress of the gifted children whose abilities are seldom challenged when they are members of heterogeneous groups. 31

Although most educators approve the practice of ability grouping for one or more of the reasons mentioned above, there are some who are opposed on the grounds that no two persons possess exactly the same capabilities, and that, therefore, it is impossible to form any group which is truly and fully homogeneous in terms of any standard that may be selected. Admittedly, this detection of diversity within the midst of attempted homogeneity is valid; but does this discovery present a conclusive argument against the principle of ability grouping? Although the range of abilities within either the upper or lower group is greater than that for the middle group, in no case is the range of abilities as great as it would be if no attempt at all had been made to group the pupils in the basis of ability.

Again, the objection has been made that the results of tests are not satisfactory bases for the selection of ability groups because tests are not infallible, and their results are not always wholly valid. Even if it is granted that intelligence or achievement tests may not be wholly adequate criteria, that fact within itself does not condemn ability

grouping. The ideal situation is that in which the mental or achievement test is only one of a number of criteria which are employed for the purpose of indicating the classification of pupils. Obtaining of information from as many sources as possible and using all the data as criteria for ability grouping are the most valid and practical procedures.

Some critics object to ability grouping on the grounds that it is "unnatural to the point of being vicious. It sets up a situation not to be found in the world outside of school." 32 This contention, however, can hardly be accepted as true. For instance, during the Second World War the Army and the Navy applied the principle of ability grouping to all new recruits entering the military forces, and the mental test was almost the sole basis for such grouping. It is difficult to conceive of a sound principle upon which present-day schemes of educational guidance, vocational guidance, and vocational education could be based if not on the principle of ability grouping. As a matter of fact, in what phase of human life is the principle of selection not being applied to some degree? Since all of the currents of life tend toward ability grouping, modern attempts in the school have introduced no new principle but have only emphasized the principle of selectivity which

32 T. M. Carter, editorial comment on the article, "Is Ability Grouping Fallacious?" by Laurence B. Brink in the March 26, 1932, issue of School and Society, School and Society, XXXV (June 11, 1932), 798.
society automatically carries into effect of its own accord, with little
prodding or planning to bring about this objective.

To sum up, among the advantages claimed for ability grouping
may be mentioned the following: economy in the cost of education;
the growth of group consciousness, together with the fostering of co-
operative effort; stimulation toward creative effort that individuals
receive from working in a group; willingness to sacrifice selfish pur-
poses for the welfare and progress of the group; respect for the rights
and personalities of others; realization of the interdependence of human
beings; better organization of the educational program; more systematic
evaluation of individual achievement; and the opportunity for more in-
teresting, vital teaching.  

Ability Grouping and Democracy

Perhaps the most widely accepted principle in American educa-
tion is that of preparation for life in a democratic society. To this
end, the modern school attempts to inculcate principles of democracy
within its own instructional program and classroom activities as well
as in the areas of social and recreational life. How well does the prac-
tice of ability grouping conform to the democratic goals of the modern
school?

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33 Ryan and Crecelius, op. cit., pp. 21-23.
The argument that ability grouping is undemocratic is regarded as invalid by most educators if it means that all children must be considered as being equal in ability and that they must be taught alike. Democratic ethics, far from demanding that we disregard individual differences, demand that we do take care of individual differences that each person can grow to his maximum possible well-being. This aim is the goal of ability grouping as it is employed in education today.

The modern concept of democracy is not that all people must strive to be alike, but that everyone must have an opportunity to make his own unique contribution to the welfare of society in the most efficient manner possible in terms of his capabilities. A truly democratic system of education can exist only when every group of children has an opportunity to develop to the fullest extent of capacity. This philosophy has become accepted by all who are interested in the handicapped child, the child who lacks the gifts of the average. Since democracy prides itself in the belief that it primarily functions to provide the greatest good for the greatest number of persons, let us consider who would benefit if education were to make adequate special provisions for those at the other end of the ladder—the mentally gifted.

In business, more money is invested where the returns will be greater, where there is less chance of loss or risk. Is it not, therefore, 

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incongruous that so very little has been invested in the gifted children of the nation, who hold such high potentialities for positive returns to society? In a democratic society, the superior child should be recognized as an asset who can no longer be neglected. If there were an equal opportunity for all or if at least the same opportunity were offered at the top of the ladder as at the bottom, what strides ahead, what riches our whole society might reap!

What is the fear that keeps educators from giving gifted children an opportunity commensurate with their abilities? In the early history of the nation there was no fear. Education was for those who could learn; high schools were for those who had mastered the elementary subjects.

Along with the great mass movement of children into the secondary schools of America during the 1920's and 1930's, accepted philosophies of education had to undergo change. Special provisions for the slow learner who blocked the wheels of education because of his inability were soon made. Keeping this slow-moving group of children in school and gearing education down to their level and interests have robbed the gifted child of the opportunities that once were his, when he and others like him were virtually the only ones enrolled in secondary schools. Strange to say, the very policy that made provisions for the group of children in society with lower intelligence, and did so in the
name of democracy, has discriminated against the gifted child enrolled in the public schools.  

Keeping the superior pupil in a regular class is detrimental to his ambitions and curbing to his abilities. He is no longer stimulated. He finds himself in a class in which mentally he is alone. There is no discussion on his mental level that will develop his thinking or challenge his interests. If he says too much about what he knows, he may be laughed at by classmates, who think he is a mental snob. Being intellectual, he soon learns that, in order to be popular, he must turn his ability into wit so as to amuse the class at its level. He may become unbearable to the teacher and to the rest of the class who at first fostered his cleverness.

A situation in which children are mentally challenged by their peers at every turn does not nurture egotism. Snobbishness is much more likely to develop in a classroom in which children are grouped with others of their own age whom they continually outsmart, or when they have been accelerated to an older group in which they again know all the answers. It is impossible to accelerate gifted children to those classes in which they would meet their mental age level without causing very serious social and emotional maladjustments, because of age differences and maturity levels. The best solution, then, is to arrange

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for ability grouping within the classroom or within the grade which will permit the superior child to give freedom to his interests and needs and thus explore broader fields of knowledge while others of his grade level are grubbing along in an effort to master the fundamentals.

Just why exceptional mental ability is so often resented is a mystery. We acclaim and rejoice with personal pride when a neighborhood child is a musician, a singer, an artist, or an athlete. Is it mental ability alone that we resent, and are envious of? The mentally gifted child must, for one thing, be trained to accept the fact that, if he wants to be happy and accepted by the group, he must have a more pleasing personality than the child of average ability.

Enriching the program for the gifted child is the recommended solution to the problem of his education. The question remains as to how and where this can best be done. In the regular class, enrichment is likely to become busy work, aimless research, or a tutorial job. This is no indictment of the teacher. In the regular classroom situation there are many groups, each of which needs techniques of teaching and learning all its own. Unfortunately, a teacher has only so much energy to expend, and sometimes the demands are greater than the strength to meet them. If all of the gifted children are grouped together in one class, the teacher can apply the same techniques to all of his pupils within this particular group.
However, the isolation of these children in classes in which they have no contact with other children would tend to make them self-centered and disinterested in their classmates in other groups. A plan of partial segregation in use at Colfax School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, gives mentally gifted children an opportunity to work with their mental peers in those subjects in which they need stimulation, and with their other classmates in those fields in which more social contacts are possible. Thus they go to "workshop" for academic subjects and then to home-room and regular classes for such subjects as music, art, and physical education.

In all probability, the gifted child will grow up into an adult who will serve society in the laboratories, in the professions, or in creative fields such as art, music, and architecture. The children of high ability will be the political, social, and economic leaders of tomorrow. They will be responsible for what is done with the atom bomb, after the gifted child has perfected it.

Education of the gifted is an investment which society dares no longer to neglect. So much is at stake for the future that the present must be considered in providing for those children the special opportunities for development and creativeness which they require in order to attain their optimum potentialities.

36 Ibid.
The maladjustment of gifted children arises from a lack of fulfillment of their needs, interests, and abilities. Like all children, they need security, affection, encouragement, and stimulation of their abilities both at home and in the school. The school's efforts at ability grouping are a movement in the direction of fulfilling these needs. Although much has already been done, there yet remains much more to stimulate the best efforts of all educators.

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CHAPTER II

THE USE OF ABILITY GROUPING IN DEPARTMENTS
OF THE HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM
OTHER THAN ENGLISH

Within the past forty years, the psychology of individual differences has become an accepted fact in our educational system. Not only do common sense and observation reveal great variations in the ability of children, but today there are many forms of objective data which help educators to substantiate their observations. In the four years of high school, as in previous school life, students vary widely in general mental ability, special talents, disabilities, interests, and educational needs. Yet, colleges and universities have generally been negligent in preparing teachers to meet the challenge of grouping students in order to help meet the problem of individual differences. Experimentation is needed until some practical and specific recommendations may be made—something that has been proved through trial and error, something that will assure some degree of success in efforts to meet the educational needs of all students. This is true not only in English but in all secondary subjects. Many high-school teachers find this problem their greatest challenge.
The problems involved in providing for the individual differences in students have increased so tremendously in recent years that there has been a widespread but unco-ordinated attempt to discover solutions. Not long ago, the students enrolled in high schools of all sizes were a fairly homogeneous group. Today, however, the high-school population, particularly in large high schools, represents every element in American society. That ability grouping is widely used, consequently, was indicated by an investigation conducted by the National Education Association in 1943, which disclosed that seventy per cent of the junior high schools and fifty-six per cent of the senior high schools which were polled provided special English classes for slow students.1 Educators have made a more intensive study of ability in the English department than in other subjects; however, many secondary schools employ some type of grouping in a few or in all of the subjects in the curriculum. Wise handling of individual differences by means of grouping can help children enormously. Faulty or ignorant handling can hamper their progress in school and injure their chances for advancement throughout their lives.

Ability Grouping in All Subjects

The Hornell High School of Hornell, New York, is an example of a school which employs ability grouping in all of the basic subjects of

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its curriculum. Cooke has described in detail the plan being utilized by this particular school, which for some twenty years has been experimenting with a three-way program for pupils of low reading ability and another for the pupils of the highest scholastic ability in addition to the usual academic program. These plans, however, are followed only in the basic subjects such as English, the social studies, science, and mathematics.

This high school has approximately eight hundred pupils enrolled in the upper four grades. There are fifty classroom teachers, an administrative and guidance staff of seven persons, an attendance officer, a testing supervisor, a part-time nurse, a part-time doctor, a librarian, and a principal.

The program got under way two decades ago with a class in business English, but it has expanded until now there are four-year sequences in English, the social studies, and one-year courses in general science and mathematics. The grouping is entirely voluntary. No pupil is required to join any bracket or ability group unless he and his parents are willing for him to do so. The guidance department and the testing supervisor always recommend to the pupil such a placement as will fit his needs and abilities and enable him to do his best work, and in most cases the pupils are glad to follow this advice. All teachers

who work with these special groups must realize the fact that scholastic ability is a highly specialized ability and that many children who have limited scholastic ability may, and often do, have other abilities that are valuable in modern society. In such cases, these other abilities must be developed to the utmost.

In the Hornell High School, pupils are not segregated in anything except their classes. In the phases of school life which the pupils count as important—sports, home-room, and social activities—there is no segregation whatsoever, and all pupils have complete freedom of participation wherever their interests and abilities lie.

For those pupils who have been guided into a predominantly non-academic course of study, with special emphasis upon vocational and commercial fields, there is no apparent feeling of inferiority when they compare themselves with those pupils having their main work in the academic curriculum. Possibly this wholesome attitude exists because the non-academic pupils know that they can go out into the world and attain as much success in the lines of work for which they have been prepared as the academic graduates can hope for in their fields. The practical appeal of such a program is evidenced by the fact that eighty per cent of the pupils who enter Hornell High School as freshmen remain in school until the date of graduation.  

3Ibid.
Before any plan of ability grouping such as that in practice in Hornell is set up in any community, the proposal must be carefully explained to the adult citizens of the community as well as to the children themselves. Some intelligent and responsible citizens of the community may object to the plan. If they do, they can be asked, "Would you prefer that the pupils be eliminated from school opportunities altogether, as is the case in too many schools?" Some may offer objections to the plan because the slower pupils are allowed to remain in school even though they do not meet the required scholastic "standard." Some will object because these pupils should be "made" to do the academic work, whether they have any ability for it or not, and regardless of whether it would hold any practical value for them. There will be objections from some because the slower pupils may have a tendency to "loaf," and some will argue that the practice is not democratic. All of these fears and doubts are groundless, and a constructive philosophy on the part of the administrators and teachers can overcome any objections that can be offered by those who are skeptical. ⁴

Practically all principals who inaugurate some plan for ability grouping find that their teachers soon become enthusiastic participants. Working with segregated groups, and with special classes, they will be able to plan their work better, and they can see more tangible results emerging from the educational program.

⁴Ibid., p. 81.
With a well-developed program in the basic subjects for the most intelligent students, there are many opportunities for the teachers to challenge these bright pupils to do work that would ordinarily be possible only in the best colleges. They may be encouraged to read and explore materials that should make them especially capable of making a good showing on the scholarship examinations which are becoming more popular every year. At Hornell High School, scholastic morale has greatly improved since classes were established for the most intelligent pupils, who are now able to attain recognition for doing the work for which they are mentally equipped.

One problem that is difficult to solve with all ability groups is that of finding teachers who are suitable and trained for work with these specialized groups. Scarcely any teacher-training institution is making any effort to train teachers for this work. This lack of well-prepared teachers is one of the bottlenecks in the progress of any plan of ability grouping. Another is the lack of suitable textbooks and syllabi.

Cooke believes that if enough schools would establish a plan of grouping similar to that found in Hornell High School, in time the colleges would begin to prepare teachers for work with these special groups of pupils, the book publishers would issue suitable textbooks, and state departments of education would formulate syllabi to be used as guides with groups of different ability levels. If this could happen,
there would be a rebirth of interest in secondary education, both in the schools and in the communities. The nation is not particularly well satisfied with its secondary schools as they are now, and any improvement in their program would certainly be welcomed in all circles. There is ample evidence of widespread dissatisfaction with secondary education when one notes the deluge of articles which appear in virtually every professional magazine criticizing some phase of secondary education.

The grouping plan employed at Hornell High School is not a new or novel idea. It has been tried many times, and has often failed. But where failure has occurred, it usually has been because the principal or the superintendent expressed skepticism or lack of sympathy for the idea, or else the pupils were compelled to go into the grouping in which the staff or the teachers had arbitrarily placed them.\(^5\)

A differentiated program of instruction recognizes the fact that abilities are of many kinds and that a child lacking in scholastic ability may have other abilities which, if properly developed and encouraged, will make a worthy contribution to society. Consequently, three groups are organized in Hornell High School: the academically accelerated, the average, and the retarded groups.

The fast group, formed at the beginning of the pupils' tenth year in school, consists of those children who have shown by the results of

\(^5\)Ibid., p. 83.
standardized tests and by their general educational performance during the ninth grade that they are capable of doing superior work. This group is given an enriched and extended program and begins to prepare for college-entrance and scholarship examinations. The median group—those of average ability—follows the work prescribed by the state syllabus. However, considerable freedom is permitted in the choice of courses: business, art, music, science, vocational subjects, college preparatory, and so on. The retarded group follows a course which stresses vocations, citizenship, and social attitudes; and effective techniques in remedial reading are emphasized.

No stigma is attached to the third, or lowest, group because no pupil is required to take work on that level. A child with an intelligence quotient of seventy may take college-entrance work if he insists. However, every child who, after careful and extensive testing, seems obviously unable to cope with the traditional program of instruction is counseled and advised to enter classes on the third level of instruction, wherein he probably can make satisfactory progress after he becomes adjusted to the learning situations that are presented to him. In numerous cases the parents of such children are consulted in order to enable them to understand the child's limitations and the reasons why his teachers recommend the third level of work for him. A child in the slow group may achieve the honor roll in terms of his
achievement at the level at which he is working. From this group come some of the best athletes and most effective leaders in various activities. 6

**Ability Grouping in the Social Studies**

Everywhere there is a strong tendency to consider the social studies the most important subject area in the entire school program. Many educators whose major interests are in other departments and many laymen in all walks of life are confidently looking upon the social studies as having the greatest possibilities for practical service to society in its attempt to cope with its unprecedented problems and perplexing situations. Yet there is, perhaps, no other departmental group of subjects concerning which there are a tenth as many differing opinions as to what material should be selected and what type of organization should be adopted. Various factors account for this divergence, of which the most obvious is the extent and complexity of the social studies area. 7

Ability grouping is being employed as an experimental solution for coping with individual differences in the social science classes. Social science teachers must take the individual children as they are, and learn to go on from there. The weaknesses and the strengths of the student's social thinking must be shown to him; the vision of social betterment must be presented to him, within the limits of the comprehension and general ability of the pupils in his particular group. Otherwise, the result of teaching will increase the aggregate total of literate

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people in terms of reading and writing, but may not increase the aggregate total of socially literate and liberal-minded citizens.

In an effort to sample teacher opinion on the problem of treating individual differences in the social science departments of secondary schools of Texas, the Dallas Council for the Social Studies sent a questionnaire to its members and to a dozen other schools and school systems of the state. The result of this survey provided an insight into the views of social studies teachers in several Texas high schools in regard to provisions for individual differences in ability grouping.

Dorothy Gerlach, author of the report of the survey, is a teacher of American history in the Forest Avenue High School, Dallas, Texas, and president of the Dallas District Council for the Social Studies.

The teachers who preferred to utilize ability grouping in their social studies classes submitted the following reasons for doing so:

(1) those pupils with higher intelligence and ability are challenged to a greater degree and find more satisfactions in their work; (2) those with lower intelligence are not so likely to become timid and withdrawing; (3) grouping provides for the acceleration of the more able; (4) heterogeneous grouping necessitates the devotion of too much time to the slow pupils; (5) the slow learner should not be asked to travel as fast as the brighter pupil; (6) heterogeneous grouping often results in

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the development of inferiority complexes in the slower learner; (7) with a large class, the teacher does not have time to take account of individual differences; (8) outside of the classroom each one has to seek his own level, and he should have the same privilege within the class; (9) ability grouping makes for a fairer distribution of the teacher's class load, and it lightens his problems.

There was an awareness among these Texas teachers that the school is for the pupils and must guide the development of the individual child into becoming a responsible adult member of society. Many of those questioned advanced the opinion that ability grouping in the social studies program is a major factor in the development of each individual child.

Differentiation in assignments, even within the ability groups, suggested another major problem—that of providing for different levels of achievement in assigned units of work. The Dallas teachers expressed a belief that different levels of achievement should be provided for within the units of work. The chief value of such levels in an assignment is their adaptability to the individual differences which exist even in segregated ability groups. Some teachers mentioned the point that in a grouped system of teaching the social science subjects, more correlation of literature with the social studies is possible.

Many teachers felt that, through the use of ability grouping, there could be a better system of grading. Should the pupil who learns
all that he is capable of learning get the same grade as the better pupil who also learns all that he is capable of learning on his own level? The tendency in grading appears to be in that direction. Does such a plan of grading create false hopes for success in life after the completion of school? It is quite true, as was pointed out in some of the replies, that "the school is more lenient in the grading of pupils than is life with adults."

Many teachers have become convinced that ordinary classroom work in social studies fails to stimulate or call out the best in abler students. If their capacity to become the thinkers and leaders of the future is not being adequately developed, that weakness in the school's program of citizenship education demands attention and correction. Special provision for the superior students is often administratively difficult. The head of the social studies department in the high school at Summit, New Jersey, has used a special modern-problems course for senior superior students. The students work individually on social problems and engage in research, group discussions, and the writing of papers as the final culmination of the unit of work. Members of these special groups always feel that the venture has given a zest to their last half year in high school, and that they profit not only in acquiring more information but also in developing better study habits, realizing the evils of procrastination, learning to work on their own

\[9\text{Ibid., p. 300.}\]
responsibility, and mastering some of the fundamental techniques of research. 10

Carlos De Zafra, Jr., a teacher in Batavia, New York, has had the revealing experience of teaching nothing but high-school American history for five periods a day and five days a week. According to De Zafra's statement, his teaching task is far from being monotonous because of the various ability levels of the groups of students. "An American history class on the 'A' or highest-ability level is but distantly related to an American history class on the 'C' or lowest-ability level." 11

The students who enroll for social science in the Batavia High School are classified into three main groups—those of superior ability, those of average ability, and those of below-average ability. Within each group there will be, of course, some range in capability. However, the careful adaptation of the curriculum to each of these ability levels usually insures both that the work is not beyond the capacity of the least able pupil in any single group, and that it is sufficiently challenging to the very brightest pupil in any given group.

The pupils classified in the low-ability group demand special objectives in view of their being the followers and in the light of their

10 James E. Downes, "An Experiment in Meeting Needs of Superior Students," Social Education, IV (April, 1940), 249.

inability to remember facts for any appreciable period of time. The prime objectives for this group in the social studies would seem to be to inculcate good attitudes and to aid the students in making a satisfactory adjustment to their contemporary world. To be successful, the C-level teacher must genuinely like and understand these pupils. This group needs simplified textbooks, much visual material, frequent quizzes and check-ups; and they profit more from written work than from long discussions.

In direct contrast, the intellectual leaders make up the A-level group. These are the people with whom the evils of society may be discussed. These are the students who will understand and appreciate vision, the power of analysis, the ability to interpret and to think critically.

Because they are capable of comprehending abstractions and of arriving at generalizations, according to which they will be able to measure and to evaluate all civilizations, these A-level students will eventually be able to direct the path of the future in the light of the past. 12

The B-level or average group, like the C-level, are the followers. They are more intelligent followers than those in the lower group because they are capable of more comprehension. "B-level students may even be the leaders among men who, as active champions of ideas arrived at by the A-level people, will put progressive improvements into

12 Ibid., p. 496.
actual operation. It is this group which needs, more than anything else, to understand the world as it really is. As a consequence, they will be better prepared to follow intelligently.

The mental ability of pupils frequently explains their rate of achievement in social science courses. If instruction can provide for individual differences by using ability grouping, the work of students is likely to represent their maximum achievement, or at least more nearly the maximum than is the case when all pupils are required to study the same amount and quality of subject matter.\(^{14}\)

**Ability Grouping in Mathematics**

Providing for individual differences in all instances is an ever-present problem of the teacher of mathematics. The department of mathematics is second to English in the list of secondary school subjects classified as basic which are taught in ability groups. Many teachers of English and mathematics feel that ability grouping enables them better to adjust the classes to the needs of the pupils engaged in work in these two subjects which are so basic to all other academic instruction.

Though many secondary schools group the students according to ability throughout the mathematics department, others confine ability

\(^{13}\)Ibid.

grouping to the geometry classes. For a number of years the members of the mathematics department of the Roosevelt High School, Chicago, were dissatisfied with the results of their teaching of plane geometry. The pupil population of this particular high school is composed of students who plan to attend college, and a large proportion of them do enroll in college within a short time after their graduation from high school. Since many colleges require a year each of algebra and geometry for entrance, a large number of the Roosevelt students elect these two years of mathematics. 15

From the results of tests and teacher ratings, classes composed of pupils of low geometric aptitude were organized. In these segregated classes, those who would otherwise have experienced a much higher mortality rate in this subject reduced their failures to ten per cent, or three per cent of the total tested for aptitude. It is questionable whether these pupils would have had as successful an experience in regular classes, competing with the remainder of the students. "In commenting on the experiment, one of the teachers of the segregated classes wrote, 'I believe they enjoyed geometry, and I can't say that for a slow child in a heterogeneous group.'" 16 The child who would otherwise hesitate to exhibit his lack of understanding in a heterogeneous


16 Ibid., p. 185.
group lost his hesitancy in a group of his own kind, in which all members were struggling with similar problems.

Superior students achieve more by being in special sections in mathematics, provided subject matter and methods of teaching are adapted to the group. Some form of ability grouping in mathematics has been practiced in more than half of the state universities. Grouping in college mathematics is usually based upon previous grades in mathematics or special placement tests, but various forms of psychological and intelligence tests are also given. Mathematicians express themselves strongly in favor of ability grouping, with necessary adjustments of subject matter and method. A definite trend toward ability grouping in mathematics is observable in the state universities.¹⁷

There is a pronounced need for more enrichment phases in the classes for the superior secondary pupils. Recognition of individual differences even in this superior group requires most extensive investigation of the avenues of enrichment. It is inevitable that student needs and subject-matter requirements shall intersect to reinforce each other when careful teacher planning exists. Some possibilities to be explored in an enrichment program are the addition of new subjects; selecting more difficult materials; making available more supplementary books; providing more opportunities for contacts with

interest-arousing institutions, events, and people; and encouraging more meaningful pupil activity and accenting the development of the initiative. 18

In the wake of the educational program provided for veterans of the Second World War, 50,000 engineers were graduated in one year; the normal output before that time was about 10,000. This increase, of course, does represent some recovery of the superior students in the field of mathematics, but, for the most part, it was only by accident of the war and the "GI bill" that much of this talent was recovered. The United States cannot afford to continue this waste of manpower, which is prevalent in many fields of human endeavor.

There appears to be a need to broaden the bases of the mathematics manpower pyramid. Too much tendency has been in evidence toward screening and concern for the specific training of a few who, like athletes, will represent us in competition in the war of mathematical and scientific ideas. "There has been too little concern for the 'second team.' The mountain climber who alone scales the peak is supported by a string of bases manned by numerous 'seconds' upon whom the burden of the monotony and detail falls." 19 Provision for three ability groups would take care of the small percentage of


19 Ibid.
individuals at the top and bottom and also the large group between who could fill in as the "second team."

There is a definite need to consider possibilities for selective acceleration. Colleges should provide every opportunity for admission to advanced standing on presentation of evidence of superior high-school work. 20

Fourteen per cent of the high school seniors surpassed the average of college senior men twenty-one years of age. In spite of the official efforts to make students keep pace with the course-credit drumbeat, the bright ones do tend to slip ahead. . . . If a freshman in high school possesses intelligence that places him with the top ten per cent of the seniors, and displays a command of knowledge in every field that is far ahead of the average fourth-year student, why must such a child still rank as a freshman and remain committed to the same four-year path that is prescribed for a dull or average fellow classman? 21

In the Lyons Township High School, La Grange, Illinois, all pupils in grades nine through eleven are sectioned in English and mathematics. Three groupings are used, minimum, regular, and special. The criteria used for placing the students are mental test scores, achievement in mathematics, reading ability, and a prognostic test score. For grade nine an algebra aptitude test is employed. It is somewhat more difficult to predict success in plane geometry than in algebra and thus to place students in their proper sections. Achievement

20 W. S. Learned and Ben D. Wood, The Student and His Knowledge, p. 36.

21 Ibid., p. 37.
in algebra does not necessarily correlate highly with achievement in geometry. Consideration of achievement in arithmetic, reading ability, mental tests, and geometry aptitude tests insures a reasonably good job of geometry sectioning.

**Ability Grouping in Science**

Since courses in science in the high school are frequently elective, there is not as great a need for ability grouping as there is in the other departments. However, some schools do practice a form of grouping of the science classes.

The pupils entering the James Monroe High School of New York City are divided into groups according to ability as indicated by their records in the sending school, their intelligence quotients, and their achievement on tests administered by the school on registration day.

Chemistry I of this school groups its students into two classes, one class of honor-school pupils and one of non-honor-school pupils. The assignments for the two groups are identical; and the lessons, demonstrations, laboratory work, drill, review, development, and supervised study are taught from the same lesson plans. The one important difference is the ability of the pupils in the two classes.

An analysis of the results of the tests indicated that the honor-school pupils did superior work. They had acquired and retained a

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greater knowledge of factual content of the first term's work in chemistry. They had a greater ability to apply their learning to problem situations. In addition, they had a more pronounced ability to apply laws and generalizations and to analyze and solve problems. In rating these students, the mean of the ratings should be shifted toward the right for the honor-school group. If the honor-school pupils are rated on a normal distribution for their own group, they are working at a disadvantage, for those whose ratings are lowest for the group will receive lower ratings than pupils of comparable ability in the non-honor group. Ratings are very real and significant to present-day boys and girls who are competing for admission to colleges. If teachers rate them lower than their less-gifted fellow students who are not in honor classes, they are inadvertently and automatically eliminating from college many of the more capable students.

It was evident to the teachers of these ability classes in chemistry that the superior ability of the honor-class students was reflected in their achievement in chemistry. Superior students must be challenged to work up to their limits or to the height of their potential ability if they are to be trained as future leaders. The importance of working the superior students to the limits of their ability is recognized by all science teachers. 23

Ability Grouping in Commercial Courses and in Music

Certain modified and, at times, full ability grouping plans are employed by some schools in the commercial departments. In the Cranford High School, Cranford, New Jersey, there was a definite need to institute a system that would provide for individual differences in first-year typing classes. According to the system that was utilized, classes were divided into three groups and material was presented at different levels of progression.

The keyboard presentation was set up to provide practice at different levels. After the entire keyboard had been learned, a test was administered that gave results which could be used to determine the regrouping of the students for advanced work. One of the teachers utilizing this plan has written:

... I have found the ability grouping plan to be a very valuable technique for teaching typing. The teacher can constantly direct his efforts to a particular group at different levels of achievement. The group system has been very satisfactory in developing ability to operate a typewriter. It is quite obvious that students in typing will progress at different levels of ability. The ability grouping system provides for these individual differences.  

There was no attitude of chagrin or frustration on the part of those students who were placed in a lower group. On the contrary, the students demonstrated a greater degree of satisfaction because

24 Thomas F. Scutro, Jr., "Utilizing the Ability Group Method in First Year Typing," Balance Sheet, XXXIII (February, 1952), 257.
they were able to accomplish the minimum requirements for a particular group. The general attitude of the students toward the group plan was stimulating. At the same time, the entire atmosphere of the class encouraged all students to put forth their best efforts.25

The bookkeeping departments of the Philadelphia secondary schools have a sufficient number of students to make possible the organization of more or less homogeneous classes in which the instruction can be on a fairly steady level, pitched to the level of student ability. Over a period of fourteen years various methods have been employed for selecting bookkeeping students in order to group them according to slow, average, and rapid learning abilities. The students are assigned by means of evaluating the results of tests taken from their junior high school records.26

The educational system of New York City has made provision for pupils of varying abilities in bookkeeping and record-keeping classes. In a large city like New York there are opportunities for many types of programs. In this city there are approximately forty-eight academic high schools and eleven vocational high schools which offer some form of bookkeeping instruction. The problem which faces these schools is the same as that which faces any individual school—that of designing

25 Ibid.

a curriculum which will meet the needs and objectives of the students. These can be ascertained not only by studying the pupils in the school but also by following up the business education graduates and observing the extent to which their high-school education permitted them to function efficiently as citizens and as business workers in the community. 27

The factor of varying abilities may be provided for by encouraging enrollments in advanced classes only for those who can benefit from such instruction. The third-year course in bookkeeping offered by the commercial department might well be reserved for the superior students who will either become full-time bookkeepers or continue their accounting training on a collegiate level. 28

Large groups of students enrolled in the commercial department usually yield a middle group whose needs can be met by a modified bookkeeping course in which either more time is devoted to covering the subject matter of the normal course, or the normal subject matter is modified in the course of presentation. Record-keeping was introduced in the New York City schools in order to provide instruction for students who have an interest in and a need for some type of office work but who lack the ability to follow either the normal or the modified bookkeeping courses of study. 29

27 Ibid., p. 114.  
28 Ibid., p. 116.  
29 Ibid., p. 118.
Whereas the commercial subjects offer various opportunities for the practice of ability grouping, the field of music also may be made to conform to the levels of capability possessed by the students. The typical musical program of a high school attempts to develop the pupils who show evidence of possessing musical talent. Since music is an elective subject in nearly all secondary schools, a strict program of ability grouping for the masses of the students is not needed.

Musical aptitude is defined as a psychological phenomenon, possessed in varying degrees by every normal person, which makes it possible for that person to respond to musical stimuli, the response to be in proportion to the degree of talent possessed by the individual. Aptitude tests are tests of native ability. In the case of music, they attempt to evaluate the musical heritage of an individual. They measure many specific musical capacities, which when combined with many other factors, constitute musicianship. 30

In attempting to work out accurately the various tests in determining the students' ability and rate of speed at which their education is likely to progress, the Seashore tests have been an invaluable part of the general program, having consistently demonstrated their worth over a period of years. The concept that musical aptitude or talent is subject to scientific measurement is a belief quite recently developed in the field of psychology. The devices for such measurement have been inadequate and subject to valid criticism, yet they have been used

with practical success and are being accepted by music educators as instruments of real value. 31

Ability Grouping in Athletics

The division of students into relatively homogeneous groups for athletic competition is a common practice. This procedure has been based most commonly on weight or on age. The purpose of such classification is to equalize, in so far as is possible, the physical differences between individuals of unlike maturity and size, to produce more interest in participation, and to safeguard athletes from competition with those of greatly superior size and strength. 32

Classification indices are one device which is used for athletic grouping. Though these indices were developed solely for classification for track and field athletics, they can be utilized to classify for other sports as well. The best combination of age, height, and weight for the purpose of classifying for football, basketball, and other major games has not yet been evolved. Until such time as adequate studies produce more effective indices, it will be convenient and advisable to employ the same formulae that are utilized for track and field competition. The classification index is only one of the elements taken into


consideration in classifying ability groups for participation in physical-education and athletic activities. 33

In educational testing, it has been found desirable in many situations to express the status of an individual in some achievements in terms of the normal expectancy of the individual himself. Thus an educational achievement quotient may express a pupil's own achievement in terms of what should be expected from one of his own age, grade, and intelligence. The athletic quotient is to the physical education department what the intelligence quotient is to the strictly academic departments. "Athletic quotient is an index of the ability of the individual to develop power in track and field athletic events."34 The term is used in athletic circles because of its brevity and convenience. There is small probability that an index completely expressing all-round athletic ability will be devised because of the large numbers of specific abilities inherent in the many individual sports.

Boys differ greatly in athletic ability. Some are of varsity caliber and prefer the varsity type of competition. Others are approximately average in ability; and still others are far too small for varsity competition, or, are lacking in original capacity so far as athletic ability is concerned. Many kinds of competition are available for these groups of varying abilities. For the best group, either varsity competition or competition for all, modified by division into

33Ibid., p. 97. 34Ibid., p. 102.
classes as determined by the athletic quotient, is quite satisfactory.

There are, however, many others who know that they cannot win in such competition and have small incentive to train. This is particularly true of the group at the bottom of the list whose original endowment in motor skills and strength is somewhat inadequate.

Girls, too, differ in athletic ability; however, a much smaller percentage of them wish to engage in sports at the varsity level. Ability grouping may be employed more effectively throughout the physical education department with girls than with boys. The Scott Motor Ability Test may be used as a basis of grouping women's sports classes. 35

An experiment was conducted at the University of Nebraska to determine the effects of ability grouping on the motor performance of freshman women students enrolled in the classes in sports fundamentals. The evaluative results of this study could be applicable to high-school physical education classes for girls as well as college classes. A course in the fundamentals of sports, emphasizing especially the running, throwing, and jumping skills, is required of all freshman women at the University of Nebraska. This course is considered important for these particular students since a great number of them enter the university with meager training in physical activities. The students engage in this course for a period of nine weeks.

Two special classes in sports fundamentals—one for superior and one for inferior performers—are set up. The Scott Ability Test is used at the beginning of the course for purposes of determining the personnel of the groups; at the end of nine weeks the same test is administered for determining achievement records. The course calls for classes to meet two periods each week and deals with the skills and body mechanics common to various sports. An effort is made to determine the effect of class enrollment by an ability classification system upon motor performance of highly and very poorly skilled students. The superior performers benefit, in most instances, to a statistically significant extent by being segregated. Scores of inferior performers apparently are not influenced by membership in a special class. Written comments of both experimental classes indicate that the great majority of students prefer to enroll in a sports fundamentals class limited to persons of similar ability. 36

Most educators now recognize the importance of placing students in ability groups for physical education activities. This procedure will make the learning situation more favorable to the student not only in the acquisition of skills but also in a more important direction, that of formation of wholesome attitudes. Much work has been done during

the past several years along the line of working out tests of various kinds which can be utilized for classification purposes. The possible values to be gained from ability grouping in physical education include the increased individualization of instruction, the equalization of teams for competitive purposes, and the achievement of higher pupil performance levels.

Summary

Ability grouping may be employed in all departments of the secondary school as an administrative resource to promote its fundamental purpose, the development of the individual student to his fullest capacity. In ability groups the stimulus is presented to each pupil to keep pace with his peers; he is removed from the discouragement of a comparison with the student of superior powers and, what is equally important, he is spared the mental let-down and indolence consequent to a comparison with pupils at the other extreme. Ability grouping offers to each child the environment in which demands bring out the best there is in him, if he would maintain his proper place within his class.

Secondary schools have long utilized elements of ability grouping in departments other than the basic subjects, but have not applied this term to the procedures involved. The athletic and music departments have always grouped their students according to individual ability. Many schools group their students as to ability in one or in more than
one of the basic subjects, including English, the social studies, mathematics, and the sciences. A small percentage of the schools utilize ability grouping throughout the curriculum. Whenever students are to perform in some manner before the public, the deduction may be drawn that ability grouping has been utilized, though perhaps unconsciously.

For special occasions in bringing work in dramatics, music, athletics, and other phases of the curriculum before the public, those students who can give the best account of themselves and thus reflect the highest credit upon the school are chosen for prominent roles. Ability grouping is not so obvious in subjects in which performance is not demonstrated to the public, but it should be accorded a vital position in these fields as well, for the sake of the best possible all-round development of the individual child.
CHAPTER III

STATUS OF ABILITY GROUPING AS REFLECTED IN FIVE PROFESSIONAL JOURNALS

Introduction

One of the favorite topics for discussion in professional journals is ability grouping and its relation to the changing standards of scholarship in the secondary school. Many of the criticisms of secondary school standards are doubtless the result of the failure to find a satisfactory solution to the problem of educating the large number of pupils who possess very little ability in terms of the requirements of the present-day curriculum.

Investigations, analyses, studies, and reports on ability grouping from five professional journals have been selected for this survey. All articles relative to the subject appearing over a twelve-year period, 1940-1952, have been studied to determine the status of ability grouping as reflected in The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, Clearing House, School and Society, High Points, and The English Journal. The purpose of this chapter is to present a review of articles which discuss any phase of ability grouping in the high school. Attention will be given to the following phases
of the subject: special classes for superior, average, and low-ability students; procedures used in the different classes; and comments on the practice of ability grouping by teachers who have employed this technique in their classes.

One of the noticeable characteristics of these articles is the extent of variance of the terminology used by the persons reporting their studies and experiments. The terms "classification," "selection," "segregation," and "grouping" apparently are employed synonymously by the writers. "Homogeneous" and "ability" grouping are used interchangeably. In these articles there is also evidence of chronological trends in the use of educational terminology.

The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals

The National Association of Secondary School Principals is the department of secondary school administration of the National Education Association of the United States. It is the professional organization of all who are interested and engaged in the administration of secondary schools. The Association publishes The Bulletin eight times, monthly, during the school year, from October to May. Research studies in secondary education are published in the magazine.

The articles relevant to this study, appearing in the official publication, The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, during the twelve-year period, may readily be classified
into three divisions: ability grouping in general; classes for the slow learner; and provisions for superior students, with approximately equal numbers of articles appearing under each classification. Only one article directly opposed any form of grouping. Even though the author rejected the practice of grouping in all subjects, he did suggest a modification which would allow the formation of temporary groups for the accomplishment of definite purposes. "Ability grouping as it is practiced at the present time has a pernicious influence. It is undemocratic, and it reveals a basic misunderstanding of what education really is."¹

That sectioning can be organized so as to meet the demands made by a modern secondary school is the opinion of the faculty of the Modesto High School, Modesto, California. Sectioning can be so administered throughout the high school that the emotional as well as mental needs of children can be met.² On the other hand, the school people of Providence, Rhode Island, believe in grouping as an educational device for meeting individual differences. All of the students who enter the junior and senior high schools are classified according to ability


and placed in one of three sections—high, low, or average—in each sub-
ject included in the curriculum. 3

Since 1930, a phase of class segregation has been employed
successfully in Elhurst, Illinois. The school administration feels that
the retaining power of the school is enhanced by ability grouping in
each subject. 4 Another teacher who enthusiastically endorses ability
grouping says, "Ability grouping is the most successful device for
setting the stage so that one type of learner will not interfere with an-
other type's efforts to learn." 5

Since, through necessity, the curriculums of the secondary
school must be geared to the average group of students, the top and
bottom groups receive much publicity in the articles appearing in edu-
cational journals. Thirty years have gone by since educators began to
do something about the slow learner. High-school education for all
American youth pointed primarily to the imperative necessity of pro-
viding curriculums for all types of children, including the slow learners.

3 Charles H. Abbott, "Ability Grouping," The Bulletin of the Na-
tional Association of Secondary School Principals, XXVIII (March, 1944), 39.

4 George L. Letts, "Can the School Retain Them?" The Bulletin
of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, XXVI (May, 1942), 95.

5 H. H. Ryan, "Adaptation of the Junior High School Program to
the Interests and Abilities of the Students," The Bulletin of the National
Frequently, the slow learners can learn what the pupils of average ability master if they are given more time. In fact, the differences among students of the slow-learning group are primarily differences of application. The slow learners should definitely be placed in separate classes. "Pupils of this type ought to devote fifty percent of the school time to interesting and profitable work with their hands."

The course of study for these pupils is the pupil himself, his needs, and his prospects. What he is and what he is to become should be the guide for each teacher. Formal courses of study are out of order with this group. The teacher is free to use all of her ingenuity and initiative.

The teaching of reading will be an important element in the work of these slow or, as some schools prefer, ungraded groups, for the ability to comprehend written material is a skill of immense practical worth to any person. Reading is one skill which helps the adult to enter into the normal life of the community. The aim in teaching these

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pupils to read will not differ materially from that of teaching normal pupils, although methods and materials will differ radically. Every effort should be made to convince the students of the great practical value, to them, of the ability to read, even though that ability is markedly limited. Adults normally read for three purposes: for protection, for information, and for pleasure. In general, these purposes should constitute the guiding principles for the teaching of reading in this group, even though some pupils may be able to master only enough reading to protect themselves from accidents. 9

The course of study for the slow learners should include English, social studies including current events, the elements of arithmetic, penmanship, lettering, art, speech, and craft work. Since the goal of the secondary school is to aid each pupil in developing whatever talents and abilities he possesses, and standards can be set up only in terms of the potentialities of the student, the teachers should be able to help the slow-learning student choose a required number of courses which fit his ability. 10 Some special provision should be made for the kind of speech education that will be most serviceable to the slow learners. The course in speech should be primarily a course in social

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9 Ibid., p. 37.
adjustment, that the pupils may cultivate a feeling of belonging and of being an integral part of the groups of which they are members. 11

For fifteen years the Newton High School of Newton, Massachusetts, has had special classes for slow learners. The school policy was established upon the concept that there were many pupils in the high school who were incapable of fitting into the pattern of education provided for the average or above-average students. To graduate from high school has become the accepted right of all the children of all the people. At the same time, the work leading to that graduation must be meaningful, even to the slow learner. After he leaves high school, this slow learner will support education in proportion to the success with which the school now serves his own needs. 12

... The twenty percent, and more, of our student bodies in American high schools who are slow learners deserve, as do the other seventy-five or eighty percent, the best that we can give them of education suited to their abilities, needs, and purposes, designed to prepare them for happy, well-rounded, civilly competent, economically self-sufficient living in our democracy. 13


Much has been done for unadjusted and retarded children. Most secondary schools have at the same time neglected an even more important area of education—that of providing special instruction for the superior students. A pronounced shortcoming of school systems today is their failure to recognize and conserve human abilities and talents.

The rough line of demarcation proposed by the Educational Policies Commission was that ten per cent of the 6,000,000 boys and girls in American high schools have intelligence quotients higher than 120 and that, therefore, 600,000 of them are either moderately or highly gifted. Half, or 300,000, of this number live in small communities in which the high-school population is less than 500, and consequently, seldom are any provisions made for special education of this group.

For the fortunate 300,000 superior students who attend larger schools, different devices are being tried. New York City has experimented with three distinct methods, namely: (1) honor classes in English, history, mathematics, languages, and science; (2) honor schools; and (3) specialized high schools such as the High School of Science of which Morris Meister is the principal. At the Monroe High School, Rochester, New York, the program of Honor-Work is an

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experiment in education for mentally gifted children. Sixty pupils selected from freshman through senior classes comprise the special group, the work of which provides for much pupil initiative.  

The major problem encountered in the education of the gifted is teacher recruitment. Better prepared teachers are needed to carry on the work with varied materials of instruction. These teachers need special training in order that they may give these gifted pupils improved conditions for learning in a constructive effort to avoid further waste of the abilities of the bright and gifted children.  

Clearing House

Clearing House is a progressive journal dealing with the problems of organization, administration, and methods in the secondary schools.

During the period from 1940 to 1952, thirty-two articles concerning some phase of ability grouping were published in Clearing House. Twenty of the writers discussed experiments or proposals for the problem of teaching the slow learner. The gifted or superior child was given critical study by six of the writers whose articles appeared in print in this journal. The rejection of the principle of ability grouping was spotlighted in one written report of a school study, whereas the


remaining five articles dealt with the advantages of grouping for the entire high-school curriculum.

In 1938, courses especially designed for students with low intelligence quotients were initiated in the high schools of Newark, New Jersey. A special teacher who was placed in charge of the slow learners taught them the basic subjects, leaving cooking, sewing, printing, art, industrial arts, physical education, library service, and music to be taught in accordance with the regular departmentalized method.

... The experiment worked well and the class did learn much more than it would have learned not segregated. The class made a considerable gain in reading because of the effect of broadened school experience which was possible because of the grouping. 18

More is known about what slow learners cannot learn than about what they can learn. Much is known about their negative or anti-social attitudes and behaviors, but very little about their positive ones. One authority, however, believes that a great deal of knowledge not yet put into practice has been accumulated concerning the problem. 19

As a result of his wide experience as administrator and supervisor of classes of slow learners, William M. Cox has become convinced that these pupils want to learn and have an interest span approximately


19 W. B. Featherstone, "What Do We Know About Slow Learners?" Clearing House, XXV (February, 1951), 325.
equal to that of other students. Of course, a slow learner will lose interest quickly if he must compete with normal and bright pupils, all in the same class. Cox believes that the notion of a short interest span as an innate characteristic of the individual is a misconception. Observations have led him to believe that there is very little, if any, difference between the interest spans of the slow learner and of the normal or bright pupil, provided the instruction is geared to individual interest and ability level.  

Many characteristic facts about the slow learner have been revealed to teachers whose work in the classroom brings them into close contact with these students. In general, this type of student is sincere, wanting to learn, and appreciating everything that is done for him. Although these slow-learning children tend to be appreciative of their teachers, they are likely to be extremely critical toward one another. An interesting revelation which came as an outgrowth of one experiment is that low-ability students should not have too large a percentage of their school program devoted to hand work because this gives their minds too much free time to wander. When directed with


enthusiasm to areas of special interests, these pupils generally undertake complicated activities willingly and assume responsibility with pride.

The superior child and his problems have been discussed sparingly in *Clearing House*. Many valuable techniques have been developed in an attempt to encourage the pupils of low ability to attain their expectancy, but the superior pupils are not challenged to achieve up to the limit of their potentialities.

Segregated classes help the child to become emotionally more stable. The constant irritation of being held back in order for others to "catch up" with him is eliminated from the experience of the gifted child. It is remarkable how a child who has been a school problem most of his life gives up the habits that were so irritating when he is put into a class with his peers. The schools of Detroit, Michigan, use segregated classes for the superior students. There they are grouped through the twelfth grade. This grouping provides for a constant and progressive growth which is not possible through the employment of any other method.

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Teachers who have taught superior children identify them as having wide varieties of interests, good memories, logical thinking and reflection, creative ability, and will-power and concentration. Even though the bright child may be positively identified, many schools have done nothing about him except to keep him with average pupils. In such a situation his interests are not challenged, his abilities are not utilized, and he is likely to become a frustrated and maladjusted individual.

It is still difficult to see the possibilities of the child at the top of the ladder because not enough has been done with him and for him. Education for the gifted cannot have failed; it has never been tried in the classroom or in segregated classes on the scale or for the same length of time as for those at the bottom of the ladder. Until it has been so tried, stepladders have not gone both ways and democracy has not given an equal opportunity to all. 27

Before the close of 1940 Leon Mones wrote an article for Clearing House rejecting ability grouping. He felt that for the Newark, New Jersey, high schools the plan of homogeneous grouping was not succeeding, and he offered in its place a new social grouping plan. He asserted that in classes which are socially grouped, brilliant pupils may achieve their highest performance, and their best development may be realized by giving them the opportunity to help those not so gifted. Backward and retarded pupils in a class socially grouped may be

challenged to better adjustment and performance than if they were put into classes with pupils on their own level of mentality. 28

A plan was sought by a particular school to reduce its failures and to provide instruction commensurate with the ability of the pupils concerned. Since ability grouping presented possibilities, it was decided to experiment with this device. At the end of the school year less than one half of one per cent of the marks turned in at the office were failures. According to the author of the study, there was every reason to believe that the plan was achieving the purpose for which it was originated. 29

Gerald E. Nord made a survey of ability grouping in New Castle, Pennsylvania, and in ten other high schools in the same state. His study occurred as a result of the discovery that the method employed by the New Castle High School for grouping pupils according to high, average, and low abilities was efficient within itself, but that the instruction afforded was not sufficiently varied to conform to the needs, interests, and abilities of children classified at the different levels. All but two of the ten schools included in the report utilized ability grouping in some form. As a result of the study, the Pennsylvania

28 Leon Mones, "We Have Abandoned Homogeneous Grouping," Clearing House, XV (October, 1940), 77.

high schools included in the survey improved their methods of instruction for the different groups. 30

An interesting development originating in the ability-grouping idea is that which is in operation in the Julia Ward Howe Junior High School in New York City. For the past sixteen years this school has been operated as a "track school," offering its pupils six tracks or paths along which they may progress through the three grades of the junior high school. These tracks range from the lowest, which is specially adapted to pupils with intelligence quotients of fifty-five to seventy-five and a reading retardation of at least two years, to the highest, which provides an enriched curriculum for superior pupils. This school has a student body of approximately 1,400 junior-high-age girls. The school was established sixteen years ago, in 1936, in a section of New York City in which lived a low socio-economic group of a minority race. Each girl is assigned to a homogeneous group for the purposes of instruction and of learning, but she may join clubs of her own choosing for participation in the community life of the school. The highest group of unusually brilliant pupils may be placed in Special Progress or "SP" classes in the junior high school, and may complete the required work in two years instead of three if they desire. In the senior high school these pupils retain their ability grouping

and work in an Honor School within the high school, which also enables them to work at an accelerated rate if they choose to do so, but encourages them to remain in the school for the usual number of years in order to have opportunity to experience the enriched curriculum designed especially for them, for the purpose of meeting their needs, challenging their interests, and directing their abilities into creative and satisfying channels of endeavor.

In this junior high school no girl is ever doomed to remain in any one track for the three years of her junior-high-school if she can prove that she does not belong there but merits transfer to a more advanced track. She is simply placed, at the beginning, on the track where her learning and skills, to date, place her. She has the opportunity to work and learn at her own rate of speed. She is tested frequently and records her own progress. She knows that transfer from track to track is possible when she merits such transfer, that is, when her achievements indicate that she is ready for more advanced undertakings. For all activities of a social nature she may associate with any and every girl in the school, but she is a member of a homogeneous group for the purpose of engaging in learning experiences.

In the opinion of the reporter of this plan, administrators and teachers should stop trying to make every child fit into this particular teacher's Latin class or that certain class in advanced science. Educators can easily become tyrannical and cruel in their zeal to make
every child believe that he has the same potentialities as every other child. It simply is not true, and those directing the learning program for children must recognize that the school has to meet the needs and challenge the interests of the pupils—all of the pupils—or it loses its strongest claim as the pre-eminent agency for the propagation of democratic society. Some form of ability grouping or track-school plan appears to be the best solution yet devised.

**School and Society**

School and Society, a weekly magazine of general interest to the educational worker, discusses educational events, surveys, reports of original studies, research and statistics, news and notes of the meetings of educational societies.

From 1940 until 1952, the articles published in School and Society relating to ability grouping were decidedly in favor of the educational device as an effective means of teaching and learning. A notable fact revealed in the survey of School and Society for the twelve-year period was the large percentage of writing in favor of a grouping of the superior students. The views of the editor may perhaps shed some light on this fact. Dr. I. L. Kandel, professor of education, Teachers College, Columbia University, assumed the editorship of the magazine

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in September, 1946. Dr. Kandel is well-known throughout the United
States as an authority on comparative education. During the six years
of Kandel's editorship, four of his editorials favoring ability grouping
with special emphasis on groups for the superior pupils have appeared
in the journal.

Two months after Kandel assumed the editorship, he expressed
his opinion of ability grouping, as follows:

There is probably no country that has accumulated as
much information about individual differences as the United
States. There is probably no country that has made less
use of the knowledge that has been collected on this subject.
For this situation the explanation which can be offered is to
be found in a rooted fear that classification of pupils accord-
ing to their abilities is undemocratic. American education
has on the whole been geared to pupils of average ability and
to the backward more than to the selection and discovery of
ability. Mass education promises to be one of the greatest
achievements of the United States; its success, however,
may be endangered if talent and ability are allowed to be
submerged by it. 32

Two years later Kandel felt the desire of again expounding his
opinion of ability grouping, this time with stress placed on the need
of classes for the superior pupils. If the school system is to do justice
to all the pupils as individuals, the problem which is foremost is one
of adapting the educational program to the great variety of abilities
and interests to be found among pupils. While seeking to solve the so-
cial problem by bringing the pupils of all socio-economic strata together

32I. L. Kandel, "Individual Differences," editorial, School and
Society, LXIV (November 30, 1946), 375.
in the same school and attempting to cater to the wide range of differences in individual abilities, the fact is ever present that the superior students have been held back and have been deprived of opportunities for their fullest development. 33

... No matter what organization or plans may be adopted for secondary schools, it is recognized that the central problem is one of seeing to it that each student receives the education best adapted to his abilities and aptitudes. 34

A recent gesture of approval for ability grouping was Kandel's favorable editorial comment on the publication Education of the Gifted by the Educational Policies Commission of the National Education Association, in which the writers recognized the harm done to individuals and to society by neglecting pupils of intellectual ability. 35

In 1942, an article on sectioning was published which was based upon a survey of teachers who had done graduate work during the summer sessions of 1941 and 1942 at Duke University. The teachers included in the study, from seventy-six school systems, represented twenty-two states. Fifty-one of the schools represented used some type of ability grouping, and 83.6 per cent of the teachers favored sectioning of pupils according to ability. 36


The departments of education of teacher preparatory colleges received some adverse criticism in an article published in 1950. Some pertinent but thought-provoking questions were put to the ears of the colleges:

Should not schools of education introduce practical means of demonstrating how best to put their ideas into practice? How long is it since the eloquent lecturers on secondary education have stood at the front of a classroom of high school pupils? How many of them, especially among those who denounce ability grouping as undemocratic, have carried a full-time high school roster in recent years? Has one of them taught five periods a day, classes of forty, with a possible range in intelligence of from seventy to one hundred and fifty and in reading from primer to college level? 37

Yearly one or more articles on grouping of superior students found their way into the pages of School and Society from 1940 until 1952. During the same period only four writings in behalf of the slow learner were published. These four attempts to meet the problem agreed that there should be special classes for the less able students. Only in separate classes are the Binet students—those having intelligence quotients of sixty-five to seventy—allowed to progress as they should. 38

E. A. Cross has said that "three fifths of the population listen to the intellectuals above them." 39 He stated, further, that the


39 E. A. Cross, "Information, Please," School and Society, LVI (December 12, 1942), 561.
intellectuals make the dull work for their place in the middle layer, but it is the middle layer who actually shape the national destiny. The schools have, in their effort to be popular and practical, unintentionally given the greater part of their effort to the education of the average. Cross upholds this theory to a certain degree when he says, "Perhaps they were wise in doing so, but unwise in neglecting the upper fifth and in trying to give the dull the same education as that provided for the average and superior." This effort has resulted in a watered-down education for all to a point at which morons can appear to be profiting from an educational program far above their reach.

There is an educational waste which results from a failure to get every child to learn as much as he can. The superior pupils' neglect is causing a large amount of this waste. Society has clung to the outmoded motto: "Hands off! If it is real cream, it will rise." There might be some speculation about how much of that cream goes sour by being left alone. In order to save this educational loss, it is necessary that the principle of segregation by ability should be recognized by the leading educators and written into the educational system of the nation.

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40 Ibid., p. 564.

41 Irving Sorge and Raphael D. Blau, "The Education of a Genius," School and Society, LIV (December 20, 1941), 573.

In setting up a program for superior students, the selection of the teachers is more important than the actual courses which the superior child takes during his high-school career. The teachers of this class must be unusually able, since the superior child is quick to detect teachers who are of only average intelligence. The usual teacher will probably have no insight into the mental processes of a child who is more intelligent than he is. Such a teacher may even be jealous and resentful of such a pupil and often creates opportunities to show resentment and envy by means of sarcasm. The course of study may cover all of the subjects of the traditional curriculum, but for the superior child this is only a beginning, since he is able to progress at a greatly accelerated pace. It does not matter especially what subjects he learns in the extra time that comes to him after he has mastered the traditional curriculum, but it is important that he spend this time learning how to use his mental equipment to its fullest capacity. He must learn self-discipline and a spirit of obligation to do his best both for his own sake and for the sake of humanity. Superior intellectual ability is not a miracle; it is as natural as the extremes in physical strength, weight, and height. Since it is so valuable, it should be regarded and treated like any other rare natural resource. 43

43 Lorge and Blau, op. cit., p. 575.
High Points

High Points presents, as its name suggests, the high points in the work of the high schools of New York City. It is published by the Board of Education and is issued each month of the school year to all teachers in the high schools of the city. The columns of High Points are open to all of the teachers and supervisory and administrative officers of the junior and senior high schools.

A common practice in some of the larger cities has been that of separating entering students into different classes according to their ability. This is a very common occurrence in the secondary schools of New York City. Many studies and experiments have been carried out with the different ability levels, as confirmed by the varied reports which fill the pages of High Points. Since the emphasis has been centered on no one group in the system, the slow and the bright students have been studied equally.

The New York City Board of Education has not tried to carry out the same type of ability grouping in all of the secondary schools under its administrative authority. Even in the grouping of superior students, various methods are being put into practice and new procedures added from time to time. "In the New York City School System there are as many types of honor school and honor classes as there are high schools. No two schools are alike in practice." 44

44 Abraham Lefkowitz, "Honor Schools or Honor Classes," High Points, XXII (May, 1940), 5.
In the early part of the 1940's the honor school and honor classes—both educational provisions for bright pupils—came into use. An honor school is any organization of superior pupils segregated in all of their classes. Usually the students are selected by the requirement of certain scholastic requirements in all subjects. All of the classes of the honor school are supervised by a head teacher who acts as adviser for students and teachers. In the honor-class plan students are placed in special classes of each subject in which they received superior ratings. Advocates of both of these plans agree that curriculums and methods of teaching should be adapted to the abilities and needs of the superior students. In its early stages of development, the honor school was accepted by New York City educators as the practical answer to the problem of the gifted student. Before the advent of the honor systems, the methods for caring for the bright pupils had been haphazard and sketchy.

A particularly interesting feature at the George Westinghouse Vocational High School, New York City, is the provision made for the talented and the superior. A great deal has been done in the vocational

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45 Rowena K. Keyes, "Variety in Honor Schools," *High Points*, XXII (December, 1940), 42.

46 Dudley H. Miles, "Honor Schools and Honor Classes," *High Points*, XXII (February, 1940), 7.

47 Samuel A. Whiteman, "What Can We Do for the Gifted Student in the Average Classroom?" *High Points*, XXIII (March, 1941), 72.
high schools for the slow pupil. Frequently the superior child is the
forgotten pupil of any school system, but most completely forgotten in
the vocational school, almost to the extent of being considered an in-
terloper. In the George Westinghouse Vocational High School a special
class may be formed which may, possibly, cut across grade lines.
The success of the special class here is the same as in the other sec-
ondary schools; that is, it is dependent first of all upon finding a
teacher with the necessary preparation, background, sympathy, and
enthusiasm for the work. The superior student can be utilized as a
force for good in the entire vocational high school. 48

Within the past decade New York City has kept abreast of the
widespread effort to offer a better type of education for the mentally
retarded adolescent, as well as for the superior individual. 49 The
task of the high school for the slow learner is to take him, regardless
of his previous experiences or academic achievements, and to provide
suitable programs which have meaning to the pupil without respect to
possible academic graduation. Failure to provide appropriate edu-
cation, not just lowered educational standards, for the lower twenty
per cent of the school population has resulted in a crisis in the New

48 Isaac Turofsky, "Classes for Superior Children in the Voca-

49 Jacob Baskal, "The Mentally Retarded Child," *High Points*,
XXIX (February, 1947), 23.
York City system, particularly with respect to secondary schools and out-of-school youth. 50

The selection of students to be included in the slow sections has long been a controversial issue. James Mandel reported in the columns of High Points a study which was conducted to determine the validity of the teacher-selection method for slow learners in biology at De Witt Clinton High School, New York City. It had been the practice in the past for all science teachers to recommend students for slow classes on the basis of their estimates of the ability of the students. Intelligence-quotient records were not consulted. It is evident that teacher estimates of students scheduled for slow classes retain a fair degree of accuracy. Despite this high correlation between teacher judgment and intelligence-quotient records, approximately twenty per cent of the students registered in the "S" classes had intelligence quotients higher than one hundred. Theoretically, such students should not be included in a class segregated for dull pupils. The policy which the school adopted for the future was to place in the slow classes only those students whose intelligence quotients were one hundred or less. 51


51 James Mandel, "The Validity of the Teacher Selection Method for the Segregation of Slow Students," High Points, XXX (September, 1948), 77.
Ordinarily, the slow learner realizes his limitations and usually is happier when he is placed in a special class suitable to his own capabilities rather than in class situations in which he knows he cannot participate effectively. In the segregated class an attempt is made to provide educational experiences within the limits of the pupil's understanding. This class is free of the intense preparation characteristic of average classes. Also, the work is more practical, and a serious attempt is made to base the course on subject matter in which the students are especially interested. These students need more guidance than their more intelligent friends. Another important factor is the need for the guidance and, to a certain extent, education of the parents of these pupils. There are some educators who advance the plan of establishing a special school for the low-ability group. The Speyer School of Teachers College, Columbia University, is an example of the proposed school.

The slow learner's textbook looms large among his problems. A few decades ago the writer of a high-school textbook had a fairly

52 Albert Dosik, "The Slow-Learners Go to High School," High Points, XXVIII (October, 1946), 35.


homogeneous audience. The spread of ability among pupils was small. A book which was aimed at the needs of the average pupils could span the requirements of the majority of the class. But today a single textbook in a given subject can no longer care for the needs of the different ability levels which make up the class. "A textbook which can be read and understood by Retarded Roy will not supply the rich background and the deeper concepts rightfully the heritage of Superior Stanley." 56

Audio-visual aids are fine for the slow-learning group, but for the most efficient combination of classroom work and home study there are few aids as effective as the textbook, a proved universal aid to teaching and learning. Retarded students need textbooks, as do more able students; however, the retarded individual needs books written with his problem especially in mind. Simple style and vocabulary, directness of presentation, brevity of expression, concepts developed step by step, and an interesting approach and development for each unit are the specifications of the textbook tailored for the retarded students.

... An important market exists for the work of textbook writers and publishers who would give us books specifically designed for the retarded. Here and there a little ground has been broken in this field, but in the largest part it is still unploughed. 57


57 Ibid., p. 23.
The English Journal

The English Journal is the official organ of the National Council of Teachers of English. It contains general literary articles, contributions to English teaching methods, departments for discussion of recent English usage, exchange of views among members, and news and notes about the profession. The English Journal is designed primarily for teachers of English in the secondary schools.

There is a noticeable difference in the number of articles in this publication dealing with the grouping of the slow learners as compared with the number on the grouping of the bright students. During the twelve-year period under consideration, seventy-five per cent of the writings published in this journal which were related to ability grouping dealt with possible solutions for the problems of low-ability pupils.

In an article which he wrote for School and Society in 1899, John Dewey said: "The school must be changed from a listening basis to a doing or working one and must be arranged so that the child can learn by experience and learn to think by managing experiences." In an effort to apply this Dewey philosophy particularly to slow learners, Jay Greene experimented with a low-ability class by using first-hand experiences in improving community living. The placing of emphasis in the class upon positive elements appeared to result in a wholesome feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment on the part of the group. 58

When slow learners are segregated, projects which are suitable for them may be carried out with great success. They profit by field trips, as Greene's experiment proved. Trips which will give them a better knowledge of the community and will show vocational opportunities for young people with limited abilities are good means of motivating these students. 59

English should not be brought too low on the scale for the low-ability pupils. One teacher has listed the units upon which she laid emphasis for her pupils: verbs, pronouns, letter writing, simple themes, punctuation, and filling out application blanks. In working with these students she emphasized reading abilities, dictionary work, and spelling. 60 Although the teaching of mechanics or grammar is necessary to carry on the class work, this instruction must be made as simple and as easy as possible. Most of these students would like to write correctly and can be shown why a question should have a question mark after it, and why a natural pause in reading should be marked by a comma. One teacher found some success in teaching the use of quotation marks by directing the attention of the students to the radio commentators' use of "quote" and "unquote." 61

59 Mary Rickert, "Motivation for Slow Learners," The English Journal, XXXVIII (January, 1949), 44.


It is very important that the students of low intelligence quotients be taught reading. Lillian Parham, who has worked with this type of pupil for a number of years, says:

... The low I. Q. must learn by acquiring meaningful percepts in order to build up useful, clear mental concepts. He must be in a class with others who need the same methods applied to them. Their mental digestive systems consume only bits at a time and very slowly. Through diagnosis and constant sympathetic study the teacher can decide on adequate and safe doses of subject matter to be apportioned for each lesson. 62

Beryl McAdow, a teacher of English, differs with many who say that the low-ability pupils will not read extensively. She contends that these individuals will read extensively if they are given material which they can read and enjoy. These students like fiction dealing with periods of life in this country, particularly pioneer and Indian life. Stories dealing with vocations are also popular. The conclusion which she drew from her experiment was that these students must be given books to read which they will enjoy so that they may gain the three values of reading—improved reading ability, added experiences with life problems, and an interesting leisure activity. 63 In spite of their low ability, their frequent lack of cultural advantages, and their


63 Beryl McAdow, "Ten Years with Slow Readers," The English Journal, XXX (September, 1941), 574.
negligible fund of educational skills, slow-learning pupils find real
gleasure in reading. 64

The need for special classes for the bright students is very urgent.
Students of superior intelligence should be selected in whatever way
seems wisest in the particular situation. They should then be given
fuller, richer courses. If these superior students are left to move
slowly and methodically with the average group, at least in the later
years in high school, many will acquire the habit of doing only those
tasks which they can accomplish easily and quickly, without exerting
themselves. Grouped together, they can easily read two or three
books while others are plodding through one. They can discuss with
intelligence and interest more serious problems which the large part
of the class would find dull or incomprehensible. They can write
twice as many themes, because they are full of ideas, and the teacher
can correct well-written compositions in half the time required for
mediocre ones. Such students, placed in a class to themselves, would
not be retarded by long explanations or by days spent in repetition of
the work of former years, such as is necessary with those of less
ability. 65

64 Dorothy J. Whitted, "Reading They've Liked," The English
Journal, XXXII (October, 1943), 441.

65 Mabel E. Eshelman, "Our Advanced Students," The English
Journal, XXXVII (October, 1948), 420.
The aims and procedures which have been set up in the teaching of literature for average and retarded pupils have no application to the bright students. All of the most favored tricks of literature teaching are lost with this type of student. He does not have to be urged to read; he likes reading better than he likes to do anything else, and no complicated devices to arouse his interest are needed. The superior classes may make a more intensive study of literature than is possible in the other classes. These students may read many more dramas and novels than the average class, besides more relevant reference materials, thereby giving them the opportunity to work at approximately their capacities. 66

Three aspects of reading should be stressed with the superior classes. In these three aspects of reading—the instrumental, the interpretive, and the rhapsodic—there should be a clear conception of progression, a notion of where we begin, how we advance, and what we are striving for. It is a fatal mistake in dealing with superior pupils not to press them at every stage to the limit of their capabilities. 67

Conclusion

Mark Twain once said that it is differences of opinion that make horse races possible. Few horse races, however, have aroused more

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67 Charles W. Raubicheck, "The Reading of Superior High-School Pupils," The English Journal, XXIX (September, 1940), 546.
differences of opinion than the problem of how to cope with individual
differences and what methods are best. Ability grouping, one of the
many suggested methods, has aroused many educators' enthusiasms
and, on the other hand, it has provoked the contempt of some educators.

The issues of five professional journals during a twelve-year
period which were examined for this survey reveal two phases of abil-
ity grouping to be predominant in the minds of educators—the grouping
of the bright children and of the slow learners.

One might draw the conclusion from this study of more than
sixty articles published in the five journals that the slow child is much
more thoroughly briefed in school to take a constructive place in the
workaday world than are the future presidents, atom tamers, and virus
battlers. Snugly entrenched in "topsy-turvy" values, we spend millions
each year to conserve the soil, wild life, and national monuments, while
the nation's most precious resource—human intelligence—is allowed
to trickle away through non-stimulation and lack of use.

During the thirties an apathetic America was shocked to discover
the poorly fed, poorly clothed, and poorly housed group of its children.
During the forties intensive education and a revived free economy have
done much to raise the status of these children. The low-ability stu-
dents have been given special attention in nearly all large school sys-
tems. If a ten-year period was sufficient time for educators to become
aroused, and, by experimentation and study, make progress toward
the solution of the problem of the slow learner, then the fifties must be
ready for the problem of the bright student. The urgent need of the
fifties is for an equally indignant and aroused America to face squarely
the needs of the neglected bright students of its school population and
to get this tremendous national potential into gear for eventual creative
work.
CHAPTER IV

PROCEDURES AND TECHNIQUES IN
ABILITY GROUPING IN ENGLISH

Introduction

The preceding chapter consisted of a survey of the status of ability grouping in general education and in various subject-matter fields as reflected in five professional journals. In the present chapter, the writer is attempting to present methods and procedures in ability grouping in English in the secondary schools. The full ability-grouping program, which may well be used in large schools; the procedure for segregating the students of low ability; the method of providing classes for the superior pupils; and the modified grouping which may be used in the high school of three hundred or fewer students comprise the four kinds of ability grouping which are surveyed in this chapter.

Large High Schools With Full Grouping Program

Students can readily be classified into three main groups for English instruction—those of superior ability, those of average ability, and those of below-average ability. Many large high schools follow this plan of classification. Within each group there will be some range
of ability levels. Yet, the careful adaptation of the curriculum to each of these levels usually insures both that the work is not beyond the capacity of the least able pupil in any single group, and that it is sufficiently challenging to the very brightest in any given group.

Many large secondary schools in the United States do classify the students in English into these three general groups. Some schools place special emphasis on classes for the retarded; other schools hold to the theory that only the superior should be segregated.

In one large city school, the Long Island City High School, New York City, special groupings in English for the high-school level begin with the ninth year, in which provision is made for the normal pupils, those needing remedial instruction, and those with speech defects. In the tenth grade, in addition to these special classes, the bright students are placed either in honor classes in English or in journalism, according to their personal preferences. In all, some 800 of a total of 2,400 pupils are placed in special classes in English which meet their needs and foster the development of their interests and abilities more adequately than would be possible in regular classes in English. The plan has been most effective in its efforts to meet individual differences, and its results have been, on the whole, highly commendable.  

As early as 1926, ability grouping was introduced into the English department at the James Monroe High School, New York City. The

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original program was expanded and improved from time to time until, by 1939, ability grouping was employed throughout the department. The English teachers of this school were thoroughly convinced that activities in the English classroom should be significant and interesting to the pupils who are called upon to engage in the activities.²

The department modified the basic course of study and adjusted the assignment of individual pupils to grades and classes in order to meet pupils' needs. The pupils who passed the courses were differentiated into groups of normal ability and aptitude and groups of high ability and special aptitude. Special classes for the students with high ability were first organized, and finally a sequence of grades of English was established. For the failing pupil, a plan was devised whereby the student failing in a given term of English would be assigned to a class for such failing pupils, in which the literary material of the higher grade would form the content of the course in literature and in which the language study would be adjusted to the abilities and needs of the group. Discouragement and loss of interest on the part of these failing students were lessened. About eight per cent of the student body has at one time or another been assigned to one of these classes for retarded pupils.

New Rochelle, New York, has a secondary-school population of 3,350 distributed in two junior high schools with enrollments of about

²Frank Smerling, "Grouping of Pupils in English at James Monroe High School," High Points, XXI (February, 1939), 27
850 each and in one senior high school with 1,650 students. The senior high school is a comprehensive school which provides a variety of vocational and business training opportunities as well as the usual college preparatory and general curriculums. This school follows a regular plan of ability grouping in English, which is applied to all secondary-school students. This grouping begins in the seventh grade and is based upon the results of the Stanford Achievement Test, recommendations of the sixth-grade teachers, and intelligence test scores. 3

When students are promoted to the senior high school, they are placed in groups according to the classification made by the junior high school counselors. These classifications are based upon scholastic achievement in junior high school standardized achievement test scores and recommendations of teachers. All students, including those in the vocational trades and business education curriculums, are placed in college preparatory English groups if they are able to do the work required. The students are grouped into three classifications, the college preparatory students, the vocational and business education pupils, and the general or non-academic students. The regent or college preparatory group is, in turn, broken down into three classifications—those who maintain an eighty-five average, those with a seventy-five to eighty-five average, and those with a sixty-five to

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seventy-five average. The vocational and general group have two divisions, one higher and one lower. There are English classes for each division of the classification. 4

All grouping is flexible in that a student may move up or down, depending upon his accomplishment in a particular subject; and the change from one group to another may be made by the counselor at any time. A student may be in a low group in one subject and in a high group in another subject. Grouping is determined more on achievement than on mental ability; however, both are recognized as factors in student placement.

Ability grouping in English has been in use for fifteen years in Modesto, California, high schools. A complete grouping program has grown out of these years of experimentation and "trial and error" methods.

. . . In the secondary school and particularly in the English department, if sectioning is carefully done, the students' feelings of belongingness, security, and importance are fostered, because there can be a group morale established and a fine rapport developed between student, other members of the class, and the teacher. 5

Alexander Frazier, an English teacher in the Los Angeles County Schools, Los Angeles, California, states another affirmation of the usefulness of ability grouping in high-school English:

4Ibid.

... Whatever may be said about the effectiveness of ability grouping in general, there is little doubt that ability grouping is one of the most satisfactory methods of separating students for the teaching of English.  

Hope High School, Providence, Rhode Island, is another large secondary school that uses a system of classification by ability in English. Provisions are made for three levels in each grade. The pupil's placement depends upon his reading ability and his intelligence quotient. There is no rigid rule for permanent placement in a certain group; instead, the flexibility of the plan employed provides that if a student does better work than expected, he may be moved up. The students are not moved down, however, unless they demonstrate conclusively that they cannot do the work of the group to which they have been assigned. In Hope High School there is no reward for lazy English pupils.

In all probability, Texas secondary schools have as much ability grouping carried on in the English classes as do the other states, but, for some unknown reason, Texas educators seem more reticent about the experiments and studies in this particular field, as indicated by the small number of articles which have presented the question of ability grouping in professional journals since 1940. In 1951 a questionnaire sent out by the English Department of the North Texas State College,

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Denton, Texas, revealed the fact that one out of every ten secondary schools in Texas uses ability grouping in English.

In the Houston, Texas, secondary schools, ability grouping for all classes was abolished in 1942 after sixteen years of use. The ability grouping program which took its place was one of special subject areas, particularly English, in which the need was apparent. The new plan is flexible enough to provide for remedial work. As a result of a questionnaire sent to Dallas and to twelve other school systems in Texas, the conclusion was drawn that there is more ability grouping in English classes in high schools than in any other classes.

Grouping of Low-ability Students

In some schools where a complete program of ability grouping is not the policy of the administration, the slow learners are grouped for instructional purposes. Administrators who do this feel that this method is beneficial to the low-ability pupils in that they receive more attention in a special class and, at the same time, the high-ability and average students may advance more rapidly without the presence of slow learners.

The slow learner does not differ in type from any other student in school; he differs only in his need for a different kind of education.

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from that available to the scholastically minded youth. This low-ability child has a very important place to fill in our modern economy and needs skills and techniques that will help him to be a more valuable member of society. Language skill is of prime importance for the slow learners as well as the other pupils. The ability of teachers of all secondary subjects to achieve the over-all goals of American education depends in a large measure upon the extent to which their pupils develop skill in English, because the further a student progresses through school, the more he must depend upon his ability to acquire information from the printed page. A major responsibility of the English teacher is that of helping all pupils to acquire this skill. As students of low, high, and average ability progress through high school, they can be successful students only when they are able to locate and select materials, use reference sources and libraries effectively, adapt their reading techniques to the purposes at hand, evaluate what they have read, and organize the information they have acquired. 10 The secondary-school English program is vital to the group of slow learners because most of these students will complete their formal education in this school.

The slow learner finds it difficult to do independent study or research in English, even on an elementary level. He is not interested

usually in delving into dictionaries, anthologies, source materials, or books of any kind, and finds it very difficult to put any such materials to valuable use. Very often, though, he will be proficient in gathering materials for a notebook or scrapbook and will do a surprisingly fine job at this. In the things in which he is interested and which he is able to do, he will often be a more conscientious worker and a more appreciative learner than the average or bright scholastic student.  

Low-ability students should not be expected to master the techniques of the scholar. Some phases of the grammar of the English language are beyond the powers of comprehension of these pupils. Language difficulty is aggravated by the fact that the slow students come into less contact with the printed word and are little affected by what contact they do have. Slow students should not be burdened chiefly with the task of acquiring knowledge. Useful knowledge of grammar for the low-ability level should be put into their possession as easily and as generously as possible, and they should be rigorously required to make some useful applications of it.

In 1951, W. W. Hatfield, editor of The English Journal, conducted a survey of the program for slow learners which is being used experimentally in a number of high schools in New York City. The

11 Joseph Bellafiore, "A Slow Class in English," High Points, XXVII (October, 1945), 78.

12 Julius G. Rothenberg, "English Errors of Slow Learners," The English Journal, XXXII (December, 1943), 553.
editor was so impressed with the number of articles which were being submitted to his magazine concerning low-ability students that he decided to collect first-hand information. The conclusion which he drew from his study was a favorable one for ability grouping of slow learners.

... The language skills and enrichment through literature profit rather than suffer in the grouping program. As to reading, the program affords limitless opportunities to the teacher in its flexibility, enabling him to follow up either efficiency and interest or need for remedial work. 13

Current periodicals suggest many means of motivation for the low-ability English classes. For the harassed English teacher of the slow learners there are few textbooks, and for the teacher in search of attractive and effective materials of instruction, the textbooks which are available suffer from numerous defects. Dora S. Barmack, teacher of slow learners, lists the following faults of the textbooks now in use:

1. They emphasize merely the techniques of reading.

2. They are, for the most part, based upon paragraph units and hence are fragmentary.

3. The personality of the slow student is ignored.

4. They ignore the fact that the slow student is an adolescent, and emotionally and physically as mature as the superior student.

13 W. W. Hatfield, "The XG Program," The English Journal, XL (December, 1951), 556.
5. Most serious of all, they lack continuity and cannot easily be translated into worth-while culminating activities.\textsuperscript{14}

In order to overcome these handicaps, an effective program for slow students must take advantage of certain basic adolescent drives, such as hero worship and love of adventure. Reading must, of necessity, be within the comprehension of the slow student, lucid rather than literary in style, and permeated with familiar idioms. The selections must be short, provocative, and varied in content. "It is in the current periodicals that I find a significant number of all the pedagogical criteria for low ability pupils satisfied."\textsuperscript{15}

In the Capitol Hill High School, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, the non-college preparatory students are permitted to schedule vocational English. The class is conducted in an informal manner, allowing the students to study about their chosen vocations. The students keep accounts in class booklets of reports on books read about their vocations, visits to business firms, and any material they consider of interest to their fields of work. These students write because they have something they want to say, and the mechanics of expression become a significant issue with them, because they see the importance and necessity of clarity of expression as well as accuracy in writing.


\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 46.
Grammar is a tool to be utilized only when it is needed, and it is taught to meet the individual differences in all forms of the students' writings. The motivation of interest and a desire to impress others with their knowledge of a vocabulary that typifies their prospective occupations are sufficient incentive for them to study and learn the definitions and uses of technical terms characteristic of their trades. The books which they read in regard to their vocations include biographies about men who have been successful in their vocations. The life of Mark Twain is a favorite book with this group.16

The teachers have observed a gradual but a sure change in the attitudes, thinking, and skills of these students who are below average in ability. Given a chance to work in their ability group and think out problems for themselves, they are showing that they can assume responsibility. "These students are learning that in order to live in a democracy they must discipline themselves and must develop initiative, responsibility, and self-reliance."17

The increased practice of instituting vocational English classes in high schools has inspired the recent publication of a textbook for these slow learners. The book, *Vocational English*, published in May, 1952, was written by Albert E. Jocken, Director of the Vocational


17 Ibid., p. 195.
High School, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and Benjamin Shapiro, chairman of English in the same school. The language and instructional materials are simple and well within the comprehension of nearly all high-school students. The illustrations, examples, and drill sentences all refer directly to the interests of the vocational students.18

Ability grouping has proved and is proving to be a mainstay for these weaker students. Where ability grouping is not practiced, a large percentage of the weaker pupils fail, or discouragement causes them to leave school; for that is the history of poor ability—quick elimination from opportunity. The slow learner should be encouraged and expected to develop the capacity for co-operative "followership." The high schools traditionally have failed to develop consciously good followers. The high schools have sold their wares to the public on the idea that every successful student was training for leadership. Obviously, when the whole populace is going to high school, not all can be leaders.

Special Classes for Superior Pupils

Educators are awakening to the fact that gifted children in the schools have been and are, even now, neglected, especially in the secondary schools. The need for greater stimulation and more adequate guidance of the gifted individual throughout college has been

18Albert E. Jocken and Benjamin Shapiro, Vocational English.
suggested by recent studies. It is clear from several such studies
that subsidies, scholarships, and fellowships are needed by many
gifted high-school and college students in order to provide them with
the educational opportunities which their abilities indicate that they
should have. 

At no other time in history has the need for capable leaders been
more urgent. The national and world plight is perhaps due in part to
past neglect of gifted children in the schools. Their development was
thwarted, and the natural inclinations of their abilities were frustrated
by conventional methods of education which held to the principle that
all children should be made to conform to a single, stereotyped pat-
tern. The child of superior intellect and the child of low mentality
could never be expected to fit a mold which was designed for the great
masses of children; and when they were forced into it, maladjustments
in personality occurred. Under the commonly practiced system of edu-
cation, large numbers of gifted children enter occupations that do not
require superior intelligence.

Many suggestions and schemes have been presented from time to
time in connection with providing for these superior children in school.
One of the means that was employed early was that of allowing superior

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19 C. Gilbert Wrenn, "Potential Research Talent in the Sciences
Based on Intelligence Quotients of Ph. D.'s," Educational Record,
XXX (January, 1949), 20-22.

Parent-Teacher, XLV (June, 1951), 4.
children to skip certain units of work; but this plan was soon found to be unsatisfactory. As most adults have learned, human beings need other things in addition to facts to enable them to fit into the modern social order; and this method sometimes brought youth through colleges before they were mature enough to assume their places in society. In the light of many experiments which have been carried out over long periods of time, it is generally conceded that superior children should have as much time in school for ripening and developing as other children. This means not a speedy trip through the educational mill, which for them grinds rapidly, but instead a full and challenging program of work throughout the same number of years that other children normally spend in school. Specialized instruction and enriched opportunities for exploration and the pursuit of special interests must be provided. Thus it is fully realized that the curricular offerings for superior children in school must be broader and richer than is true of the usual curriculum. In this connection these questions arise:

(1) Shall superior children remain in classes with children below their level of abilities? (2) What should be the nature of the enrichment that is to be incorporated into the curriculum? (3) Shall superior children be encouraged to learn more facts or to attempt creative work? The answers to these questions will vary with different groups of individuals, but every teacher who participates in a program of ability

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grouping must face them squarely and frankly and find the answers that appear to be most practical for the given situation.

That the interest of teachers is placed largely with the low-ability students can be witnessed by observing procedures at any teachers' institute, workshop, or college, where classes or discussion groups are crowded when remedial reading is the subject of discussion. Similar groups for the discussion of the education of the superior child will be very small.

... What is so amazing is that if the reading expectancy level were calculated for children, it would be ascertained that most of the slow learners have reached and are working up to and above their reading expectancy level and yet we hammer away at them! Whereas the gifted child actually needs remedial work because he falls far below what he is actually able to do. 22

The system of ability grouping for the superior child in English has been employed very successfully in Detroit, Michigan, schools. Here the school administrators hold to the belief that most of the objections to grouping may be removed by a well-defined procedure in these special classes. Lest he be conceited, the superior child should be given tasks in his class that are sufficiently difficult to demand his full energies and engage his resources to the limit. Such a class should provide him with a rich background of information, literary experiences, and thorough mechanical knowledge of his language, enabling him to be

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both creative and original in his thinking.\textsuperscript{23} The superior child should be expected to acquire much knowledge through his own search for it. His talents are such as to produce valid and dependable results. Since this type of child has relatively high capacity for self-direction, emphasis in his education may well be placed upon the acquisition and organization of a considerable background of knowledge.

The Robert E. Lee Junior High School is an example of how far one city, Baltimore, Maryland, is going for its superior students. The four hundred students enrolled in this school by invitation from all parts of the city must have superior intelligence quotients as well as excellent achievement records from elementary schools. At Lee Junior High they advance at an accelerated pace and complete their three years' work in two years. This school accelerates but does not skip any work. The covering of a semester's work in two thirds of the time is a problem for the English teachers, who attempt a solution by blocking out each term's work so that all essential experiences are included. The customary sequence of literature units, interspersed with composition and grammar, is followed, and everything possible is done to stimulate extensive outside reading. This placement in a separate school provides opportunities for creative activity, as shown by the fact that the English classrooms abound in samples of

\textsuperscript{23}S. George Santayana, "The Intellectually Gifted Child," \textit{Education Digest}, XII (April, 1947), 8.
compositions, original poems, significant art work, and models of all kinds. 24

While the students of this school for gifted children are not all prodigies, it is true that they are a picked group selected on the basis of standard tests of scholarship and intelligence. Theoretically, there are no dull or slow pupils in the school; nevertheless, many are so immature or have such poor study habits as a result of being heterogeneously grouped that it is necessary for the teachers to work with them individually.

The growth of social intelligence that accompanies this type of procedure more than justifies its use. The Robert E. Lee Junior High School is helping many fine school leaders become fine community leaders later on. 25

Educational investigators are still, for the most part, in the dark where treatment of the intellectually gifted child is concerned, with only a few scientific experiments and a great deal of personal opinion as a guide. The setting up of a long-term educational planning program is vitally needed to meet this problem.

Small Schools with Modified Grouping

In the high school of three hundred or fewer students, the administrator who wishes to use ability grouping in English encounters the


25 Ibid., p. 62.
problem created by small numbers. It is almost impossible to use a full program of grouping; however, there is the way open to him of grouping into special English classes. The discussion which follows will give specific plans and procedures which have been practiced and utilized successfully in small secondary schools. Other procedures and techniques will be presented which have been used in large-school special English classes, but which could be employed in a small high school.

A high school with an enrollment of about one hundred students, located in Greenville, California, tried to meet more adequately the needs of its pupils by reorganizing its English curriculum. This plan, which, because of the small number of students, might be termed radical by some educators, made available six courses in English. The students, regardless of their year in high school, were put in either remedial language, remedial reading, or English I, II, III, or IV— wherever, in the teacher’s judgment, they would profit most.  

Some small high schools, because of the disturbing factor of varying reading ability, have resorted to sectioning for reading levels. Teachers of the English department of the Freeport (Illinois) High School for some years have been disturbed by this common reading problem. As the number of reading retardation cases mounted,

the administration decided that something definite had to be planned to prevent lowering the standards for all and preventing the proper challenge for better and superior students. Heterogeneous grouping had given little challenge to superior pupils and no time for special help for the slower ones. The experiment in homogeneous reading groups was started to determine whether this procedure would offset failures, hold interest, challenge best students, give average students a chance, and inspire poor readers to do better work.  

At the close of a two-year period of trial for the ability-grouping plan, the percentage of poor and failing grades in these English classes was consistently lower than it had been in previous years, and also lower than in other academic subjects. The English teachers felt justified in continuing the plan because of the decrease in failures, the noticeable improvement among the good readers, and some improvement among the average readers.

A Quincy, Massachusetts, English teacher working in a high school which had no special classes for high-ability students devised a unique method for an enrichment program for nine eleventh-grade superior pupils. These students were preparing for college and had the highest scholastic records. One day each week the nine pupils were


28 Ibid., p. 36.
excused from English class in order that they might work on special assignments in the school and town libraries. The extra research work included further material about the class-assigned literature, investigation on related topics, and, if they requested it, a chance to follow a subject of personal interest. They prepared assigned reports, some of which were presented orally before the regular class, others in conference with the teacher. Each report included a bibliography, and, as they advanced in competency, an annotated bibliography.

Soon they were evaluating sources. They evaluated evidence of authority, copyright date, point of view, and seeming discrepancies with unexpected sincerity and intelligence. These students discovered the lure of research by the use of this special form of grouping. Two years of research work of this type for superior students would bring them to the stage at which they would not be content to consult one authority alone and to give unqualified acceptance to a single point of view—all of which has a part in the preparation of gifted children for higher education and life. 29 This special grouping for the purpose of curriculum enrichment could be practiced in any small high school among the small percentage of superior students.

Just as the small high school should help the superior child, so it should give consideration to the retarded or low-ability pupil by

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providing him with a special class. Marion Struthers, an English teacher in Allentown, Pennsylvania, taught a class of slow learners. Membership was restricted to pupils recommended by the English teachers—pupils who sincerely tried to do acceptable work in a regular class but could not because of some learning difficulty. The regular course of study and textbooks were discarded, and in their places were substituted whatever means was effective to induce slow learners to read, write, speak, and listen better than they had been doing. The procedure was entirely informal, with recordings, magazines, workbooks, and supplementary books being used. Definite standards cannot be established for slow learners, but the teacher must take the work as it comes. In such a class no student should compete with anyone but himself.

Measured by a standard test, the reading level in comprehension and speed was found to be sixth grade. To remedy this slowness in reading, materials used were adapted to the reading level of the pupils but were of such social maturity as to command their interest. Some of these slow learners helped others in the class, convincing the teacher that slow learners in a small homogeneous group are just as capable of helping one another as pupils of an average class. At the close of the year the growth of the class in reading was measured by

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testing, and the median of the class was found to be grade nine. Listening and talking habits had noticeable improvement, thus giving progress in social adjustment. 31

Through careful studies of their own situations, small high schools should be able to use a type of ability grouping which would adequately meet a particular need for them. A special class could be formed to meet a reading deficiency in the school. With a well-developed program in the basic subjects and even part-time enrichment classes for the brightest pupils, there are many opportunities for the small high-school English teachers to challenge these bright people to do work that would ordinarily be possible only in college. The slow learners or non-academic pupils would not be neglected, either, if they were placed in small special classes. If enough schools would try these grouping plans, in time the book companies would supply textbooks for each special group.

Summary

Just as there is no ready solution for the problems of delinquency, unemployment, inflation, or international relations, so is there no fault-free solution to the problem of varying interests, intellectual capacities, and reading skills which exist among the pupils who are to be taught. Ability grouping is a frequently employed device

31 Ibid., p. 139.
to which the teacher of secondary English naturally turns in her con-
stant search for ways to meet the individual needs of her many stu-
dents. If she teaches in a large high school, she may have sections
for three or even more levels of ability. She may work in a school
which has classes for low-ability pupils, or in another school which
places the superior students in a class to themselves or even in a
separate school. Wherever she works, she will find that no other
teaching technique than ability grouping offers comparable possibili-
ties for developing leaders, training pupils to work together, challeng-
ing pupils on their own levels, and for teaching effectively.
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY

One of the practical outgrowths of the present-day emphasis upon individual differences is the practice of ability grouping, which, in brief, is a system of instructional organization which calls for the separation of pupils into sections or classes according to their general ability or competence in a given field of study. Pupils making up these sections are more or less homogeneous in general ability, thus making it possible for instruction to be geared to their needs, interests, and abilities in such a manner as to be more practical and meaningful than would be possible in the ordinary class in which abilities are characteristically heterogeneous. Pupils in these special sections or classes work with and compete with individuals possessing abilities similar to their own, and consequently their achievements are more satisfying. Retarded pupils, when grouped according to ability and taught skillfully with their special needs in mind, make satisfactory progress, which would be impossible in a class with more capable individuals. On the other hand, the superior students, when working together in groups of their peers, can give expression to their interests and to their creative abilities, and at the same time can be challenged and motivated by an
enriched curriculum, whereas in an ordinary class these intellectual
dividuals are usually frustrated and bored by the uninteresting cur-
riculum, which is designed primarily for the pupils of average or low
ability and therefore holds few challenges to the pupil with a high intel-
ligence quotient.

In the earlier days of public education in the United States, the
nature of the economic order was such that, in the main, only those
young people of outstanding ability who were preparing to enter the
learned professions attended schools of secondary rank. This fact
implies that the students in the higher grades were, for the most part,
those of above-average ability. Within recent years, however, the na-
tion-wide emphasis upon high-school training for every boy and girl
has produced student bodies composed of individuals varying in ability
from the near-moron to the genius. It becomes obvious that, when all
of these young people are grouped together and are subjected to the
same program of instruction, some of them will receive little benefit
from their educational experiences. In the main, instructional pro-
grams are planned for the average mass of students, leaving those of
inferior ability and those of superior intellectual rank with the respec-
tive destiny of failure in their work and of boredom, lack of interest,
and frustration.

An inflexible program of instruction planned for the masses of
young people who are now attending the secondary schools of the nation
obviously cannot meet the needs and challenge the interests of those
of higher and lower ability. For this reason, various plans calling
for grouping on the basis of ability have been formulated and put into
operation in recent decades. Though they differ widely in conception
and execution, they all have a common purpose—that of providing the
pupil with a vital, meaningful educational experience on a plane cor-
responding with his ability to comprehend and to profit from such in-
struction. In other words, the aim of ability grouping is to present a
challenge to the individual pupil on his own level and thus to provide
him with an incentive to learn.

Keeping the gifted child in a regular class is detrimental to his
ambitions and curbing to his abilities. He is no longer stimulated.
He finds himself in a class in which mentally he is alone. There is no
discussion on his mental level that will develop his thinking or chal-
lenge his interests. Enriching the program for the gifted child is the
recommended solution to the problem of his education. The question
remains, however, as to how and where this can best be done. In the
regular class, enrichment is likely to become mere busy work, aim-
less research, or a tutorial job. This is no indictment of the teacher,
who is often faced with so many demands upon time and energy that
adequate attention to all of them is impossible. It is, rather, an
indictment against the educational system in general, whose leaders
and administrators have not yet caught the vision that instruction should be made to conform as nearly as possible to the needs, abilities, and interests of the learners.

The maladjustment of gifted children within the school arises from a lack of fulfillment of their needs, interests, and abilities. Like all children, they require security, affection, encouragement, and stimulation of their abilities both at home and in the school. The efforts made by many schools to establish some plan of ability grouping represent a movement in the direction of satisfying these needs. Although much has already been done, there yet remains much more to stimulate the efforts of all educators.

As the gifted child requires special attention, that he may develop into a leader and a creative member of society, so the child of low ability needs specialized instruction to meet his needs and to conform to his abilities in order that he may become the most efficient member of society that it is possible for him to be in view of his mental handicap. He is not to be regarded as "dumb," but as an individual who can, if given proper guidance and encouragement, make a worth-while contribution to the community in which he lives.

Ability grouping may be employed in all departments of the secondary school as an administrative resource to promote the fundamental purpose of education—the development of the individual student to his
fullest capacity. Secondary schools have long utilized elements of ability grouping in departments other than the basic subjects, but have not applied this term to the procedures involved. For example, the athletic and music departments have always grouped their students according to individual ability. Many schools group their pupils in accordance with ability in one or in more than one of the basic subjects, including English, the social studies, mathematics, and the sciences. A small percentage of schools utilize ability grouping throughout the curriculum.

Whenever students are to perform in some manner before the public, the deduction may be drawn that ability grouping has been utilized, though perhaps unconsciously. For special occasions in bringing work in dramatics, music, athletics, and other phases of the curriculum before the public, those students who can give the best account of themselves and thus reflect the highest credit upon the school are chosen for prominent roles. Ability grouping is not so obvious in subjects in which performance is not demonstrated to the public, but it should be accorded a vital position in these fields as well, for the sake of the best possible all-around development of the individual child.

Opportunities for employing ability grouping are virtually unlimited in English. If the school is large, perhaps special classes can be
organized for pupils of various ability levels. In the small high school, such a plan is usually impractical, but this does not mean that ability grouping cannot be utilized. Modified forms of grouping can be put into operation even in the very small school, thus providing challenging and enriched learning experiences for the pupils of superior ability and giving special work in the fundamentals for those of low ability.

In English classes, a certain amount of drill in the fundamentals of grammar is always necessary, a larger portion of time devoted to this activity being required by pupils of low ability. But there are many ways of making drill interesting and challenging for these boys and girls; and the teacher should seek to employ a wide variety of methods. For the gifted children, a lesser amount of drill is necessary, thus giving them more time for creative writing, purposeful research, constructive criticism, and wide reading in various fields of literature. For both the low- and high-ability groups, the teacher must always employ her ingenuity in an effort to discover purposeful and beneficial activities from which both groups may profit. Lack of training on the part of teachers for undertaking such specialized work is a handicap to the effective utilization of ability grouping, but the average teacher can accomplish much if she will only devote a little extra time to planning learning experiences and to acquainting herself with the educational problems of the children of differing abilities.
Another handicap to work in ability grouping is the lack of adequate textbooks for such specialized instruction. For the most part, the teacher must develop her own textbook through experience and observation of the needs and interests of the pupils.

During the 1930's an apathetic America was shocked to discover the poorly fed, poorly clothed, and poorly housed multitudes of children within its boundaries. During the 1940's intensive education and economic progress did much to raise the status of these children. At the same time, pupils of low ability were given special attention in nearly all large school systems. If a decade was sufficient time for educators to become aroused and, by experimentation and study, make progress toward the solution of the problems of the slow learner, then the 1950's must be ready for the attack upon the problems of the superior student. The urgent need of the fifties is for an equally indignant and aroused America to face squarely the needs of the neglected intellectually superior children among its school population and to get this tremendous national potential into gear for eventual leadership and creative work.

For the accomplishment of this purpose, administrators should give serious consideration to the advisability of setting up a program of ability grouping on the secondary level in order that every child may be stimulated to engage in meaningful, practical, and satisfying work to the limit of his capabilities. Modern society demands the very
best efforts from every individual, and the school is the place where
the boy and girl should be stimulated to make their best possible con-
tribution to the welfare and work of the groups in which they partici-
pate. Children who work efficiently in the school will develop into
efficient citizens. Thus the challenge faces the school—the challenge
to make it possible for every student to discover wholesome incentive
to do the best work of which he is capable. Only by means of an in-
structional program which takes full account of individual differences
can optimum achievement be insured.
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