

Ways of Providing for Individual Differences

J. CECIL PARKER
and DAVID H. RUSSELL

Schools in a democratic society recognize their responsibility in caring for and fostering individual differences. This article describes twelve procedures through which schools ordinarily attempt to support and cherish the richness and variety of such differences.

EXPLORATION of the facts and causes of individual differences has advanced fairly steadily in psychological research, but application of these facts to school and classroom practice has sometimes faltered. In this, as in other areas of the social sciences, we know better than we do. Research data have been summarized by Anastasi and Foley, by Hildreth, and by Leona Tyler, but no comparable treatment of applications to the school has been prepared. We know that children differ in mental abilities, in achievement in school learnings and in personality traits and that these differences tend to increase as a result of good teaching.

Recently, we have become aware of the facts of individual differences in the values that are accepted and used in daily living. Much more needs to be done to provide a basis for understanding and utilizing these differences. It is a basic premise of every free society that every person is of importance as an individual and that *his* well being is vital in itself.

To Cherish Differences

Both the findings of scientific studies and the democratic value of respect for the individual suggest that differences

in a group of children should be studied and encouraged. Indeed, a good teacher's work may be described as *cherishing* differences.

How shall differences be cared for and fostered? Obviously, the first step is studying an individual or a group, as suggested by Prescott and many child and adolescent psychologists. Assuming that the teacher and the school staff have the requisite information, what steps can be taken? Over a period of years the writers have identified some twelve procedures and devices which attempt to provide for the wide range of abilities, interests, achievements and life patterns of a group of boys and girls. These methods of providing for differences may be described briefly as follows:

Retardation and Acceleration

Early schools which emphasized subject matter achievement sometimes "failed" or promoted the pupils on the basis of their achievements in some of the subjects. It was believed that keeping a child back would improve his mastery of subject matter or accelerating him with an older group would challenge his abilities to achieve in one or more subject matter areas. After

1920, as intelligence tests became common, some schools that set considerable store by their findings occasionally promoted or retarded a child in terms of his score on some mental test.

The theory that keeping a child back to repeat a grade or class will improve his academic standing has not been realized in practice. Probably most parents and many teachers still believe that in some cases it pays to repeat a grade. The research evidence in the matter is not in favor of the practice. For example, Caswell and others have collected evidence which shows that the child tends to achieve somewhat better if he is promoted regularly with his age group. The opposite device of acceleration for the bright or gifted child looks like an excellent solution for challenging a child's abilities. Again, the research evidence suggests that this is not often the case. Children who are promoted into a group which is socially and physically above them do not always achieve up to expectation. There has been a movement away from acceleration to enrichment of the curriculum, although here, once again, the term has not been always used in the same sense by different teachers and schools. Currently then, both retardation and acceleration seem to be somewhat in disrepute, but this does not mean that the two policies should be ignored entirely. It is possible that they can be studied and adapted to fit the needs of particular children or certain schools.

Ability Grouping

Almost as early as the beginning of retardation and acceleration practices, some schools where there were large

J. Cecil Parker and David H. Russell are professors of education, School of Education, University of California, Berkeley.

numbers of pupils in one grade began policies of grouping these children in terms of their general abilities. This system was variously called the three-track system, the XYZ system, and other names. A few educational authorities even formed special schools for "exceptional" children. First, the claim was made that this general type of grouping provided for homogeneous classes. Such a claim was demolished many years ago by Keliher. Teachers, too, soon realized that although children were grouped on the basis of intelligence scores or special achievements in one area such as reading or arithmetic, they continued to display wide differences in practically every other characteristic.

The more modern, detailed studies of children seem to suggest that homogeneous grouping of two children is impossible, much less that of thirty or thirty-five youngsters. The general school population is not divisible into three or four ready-made groups. This does not mean that children should never be grouped. It does indicate, however, that there is probably no one basis for forming children into groups which will apply to enough of their school work and activities to make the basis of grouping an acceptable one. Even when a multiple basis for grouping is used, such as intelligence score, recommendation of previous teacher, achievement scores, and social maturity, groups still differ widely. Groups which work effectively in one area may be ineffective in other situations. There seems to be little evidence that fixed or rigid

grouping will promote the best interests of the children and the school system.

Sub-Grouping Within the Class

The division of a class group into smaller groups for instructional purposes has become a widely accepted practice in recent years, especially in the elementary school. For reading, spelling, arithmetic and other individual skills, teachers find some advantage in working with six or eight or ten pupils instead of thirty or thirty-five. Instruction can be adapted more nearly to the needs of pupils, and the social advantages of the smaller group for children of elementary school age and even in adolescence seem to be considerable. There is little research proof, however, that grouping adds to the effectiveness of instruction. Stendler, for example, has pointed out that the rigid division of a class into three groups has no advantage over a fixed full-class grouping.

The present-day approach to grouping suggests that it should be kept as flexible as possible and that children should work in a number of different groups during the school day. The child may work in one reading group and then shift to work with a partner and later work in a different social studies group preparing a report. The principle of flexibility is illustrated in a recent curriculum guide of the Oakland Public Schools, which suggests that the elementary school teacher may employ at least six types of grouping: (a) interest grouping—children who are interested in a particular topic such as “butterflies” in science will pool the information they have gained from read-

ing different science books and other materials; (b) special needs grouping—certain children from other reading groups may be called together to form a special group for learning a particular technique they need, such as help with vowel sounds in phonetic analysis of words; (c) team grouping—here two children are working together as a team on a specific problem common to both; (d) tutorial grouping—this refers to a group formed for direct instruction by the teacher or sometimes by a more advanced child who needs help from the teacher in planning what he will do with the small group which he is leading; (e) research grouping—this is a useful device when two or more children work together on a particular topic to prepare a report for the class or other rooms in the school; (f) full class grouping—there are a number of activities which are best introduced to a total class in the sense that they are common or core learnings. For example, no matter what the different reading levels of a fourth grade may be, all of the children will need some help in learning how to use a dictionary effectively. There seems to be little reason why the teacher cannot teach the total group for this and other common topics. Choral reading, dramatization, reporting and listening to records are other examples of total class activities.

One good way for the teacher to evaluate the success of grouping is to follow the individual student through his school day and make a record of the different groups to which he belonged. If the child has typically participated in six or seven different groups during the day, there seems to be reason for believing that grouping pro-

cedures are flexible and effective in providing for differences. Especially in secondary schools a study of group membership can yield dividends in evaluating ways of providing for differences.

Use of a Variety and a Range of Instructional Materials

Grouping in a school or within a class is not usually effective unless it is accompanied by the use of varied materials suited to the needs and interests of the different groups. The day when all children in a sixth grade are expected to read the sixth grade science text or when all children in the tenth grade must read the same tenth grade social studies text is beginning to disappear because teachers know that in the sixth grade some children may be reading around third grade level and some around the ninth grade level. In the tenth grade some children may be reading around the sixth grade level and some may be reading as well as college freshmen and sophomores. Provision of the same materials for all tends to frustrate the retarded child and bore the more advanced student. Instead, many teachers find it valuable to provide a wide range of materials, both in terms of difficulty and ideas or content. Not many publishers provide texts with the same chapter headings but written on three levels of difficulty. However, skillful teachers find that basic books need to be supplemented by concrete materials, by selections rewritten by the teacher, by current materials in magazines and newspapers, and by materials written by the pupils themselves. The latter materials are usually somewhat simpler than the children who wrote

them can use in their reading. The library, the home and the community can help provide a variety and range of materials; large expenditures of money are not always needed.

Use of a Variety and a Range of Methods and Experiences

Materials and methods are closely interrelated so that the teacher who uses a variety of materials will often have a considerable range of methods of teaching and learning experiences in the class. The talented or gifted child in a special area may do extra work such as consulting of references and presenting some of the findings back to the group. Such children often organize special reports for social studies or science units. They may arrange displays or projects which result from their experiments or research. For pupils having difficulty with materials, the teacher may give shorter and more frequent instruction. He may emphasize a variety of presentations and opportunities for review without including identical materials in the repetitions. Children who are having difficulty need special help in the readiness parts of the lesson period when purposes and concepts are clarified.

There is a tendency in some schools to restrict a variety of materials and methods to the lower grades. Because differences increase as youngsters go through school, the necessity of a wider range of materials and experiences mounts in the upper grades.

The next three ways of providing for individual differences may be regarded as specific examples under this description of a variety and range of methods and experiences.

Flexibility in Assignments, Responsibilities and Standards of Work

Every experienced teacher has learned that the paragraph that would be excellent writing by John is a very mediocre attempt by Winifred, or that the description of an experiment by William should always be several stages ahead of one by Florence in the same class. Some teachers expect more work from certain students than from others. This may be dangerous occasionally, particularly in home assignments, for there is a tendency for the student who needs it least to have the largest amount of practice. Parents' expectations of what their children can do vary with the socio-economic status of the home. Teachers, similarly, must take different factors into consideration when they evaluate how well students are accomplishing their curricular activities.

Acceptance of the above principle implies that norms on standardized tests are not something to be reached by all students in a class. Instead, the various sections of a test may give the teacher further information about the variety and range of differences in the group tested.

Readiness Activities

Readiness activities are a special form of adaptation or variation in work activities. As suggested above, readiness is not something that applies to arithmetic or reading at the first grade level, but an inclusive term applicable to any child as he enters upon a new task. Children differ greatly in the preparation they need for the new task, depending upon their background

and the nature of the work undertaken. The slow learner in a particular area usually needs more readiness activities before beginning the tasks involved. The purpose of readiness activities is not to get every child up to some set standard so much as to take account of differences in his background and experience and to provide some basis for the weeks of work ahead in a particular unit.

Use of "Free" Periods

The use of time in the school day when children can make individual choices about their activities helps provide for the differences found in any group. Sometimes the "free" periods are actually circumscribed by the activities which are available in the classroom. With older children, opportunities to work in the library, to be on a committee, to engage in club work, and to participate in other activities help provide for differences in interests and abilities. Opportunities for children to make free choices may also be increased in periods other than "free" periods. The provision of such periods in the schedules of both elementary and secondary pupils is important.

Variations in Use of Student's Time

This suggestion is very close to the ones above but may be affected, particularly in the school, by the scheduling practices of the school officials. A number of high schools now make it possible for students to change schedules in the middle of a semester as needed, rather than requiring them to fit into a rigid pattern of curricular activities for a semester or a year. Sometimes the guidance officer can be help-

ful in encouraging students to use their time in different profitable ways. Students may be excused from certain work which is humdrum repetition for them. After-school and week-end demands on the students' time can be related to knowledge of individual differences. The trend toward including blocks of time, consisting of two or three conventional periods, illustrates a schedule variation related to differences.

Individual Attention

In a class of thirty-five children or a school of five hundred students, it is difficult to give each child the help in a face-to-face situation which he sometimes needs. The teacher's questions, tone of voice, gestures, praise, blame and ignoring may all be inter-personal reactions. Such individual attention should not be reserved for the troublesome or retarded pupil. Many teachers plan their school day or periods so that part of the time they are free to walk around a room and talk to individuals. Others plan systems of "pupil partners" where the child is working as an individual with one other individual. Even a large school attempts some individual attention through its counseling services. All of these are attempts to treat the child as an individual in his own right. In the widest sense, his learning and his development are his own. He can be helped most when he is considered as an individual or an individual in a small group. There is probably no substitute for the direct personal attention which a teacher can give by snatching a few moments from the busy school day. Such individual attention becomes more effective as class size is reduced.

Remedial Instruction, Classes, Laboratories, Clinics, Workshops

Only when a child is seriously ill does he get much individual advice from a physician, and only when he is severely maladjusted to the school program does he get much individual help from a teacher or school official. The aim in remedial instruction has ceased to be the effort to get a child "up to grade"; rather, it is to provide for his abilities and problems at a level on which he can profit by the materials and the instruction. In other words, remedial education is caring for each child according to his needs. Sometimes, if his difficulties are intense or deep-seated, the laboratory or the clinic can be called in to help in diagnosis and to suggest a remedial program. The analogy to physical health mentioned above suggests that such facilities should be available occasionally to the child who is having only a mild difficulty or who seems to be "normal." Positive emphasis upon individual traits and personality and achievement patterns offers considerable hope, not only for avoiding remedial instruction and classes, but for the positive contributions it can make to the development of very different children.

Flexibility in the Use of School Personnel

Just as there are individual differences among children, there are wide differences in any faculty group. The careful principal or school administrator will occasionally attempt to adjust his teaching and administrative personnel to the group with which he is going to work. It is sheer waste to assign a

teacher to a group of children he cannot accept for such reasons as their mental ability, their race, or their socioeconomic status. In addition, all teachers can be recognized for the things they do best and should be provided increased opportunities to do them.

The twelve methods of providing for individual differences listed above do not exhaust the variety and ingenuity of school people in coping with this problem. Many schools use some forms of these procedures and others undoubtedly employ contrasting methods of providing for differences. Supervisors, principals and school staffs may find it profitable to use the dozen methods as a basis for discussion and begin-

ning attack on the problem in their own schools.

Such a list suggests too that there is no one best method of providing for differences which applies equally to all schools. Acceleration and retardation alone, or individualized teaching alone, will not solve all the problems created by the fact that children are so different. In many school situations probably some combination of these and other methods is desirable. Since causes of differences are complex, attempts to provide for them must necessarily be varied and flexible. The multi-pronged attack on the problem is most likely to succeed. Such an approach may be a key to total curriculum improvement.

A Faculty Meets the Needs of Pupils

FRED E. BROOKS

In the primary school program described in this article, teachers and parents have devised a means of providing a freer and more adequate instructional program for all pupils.

THE "graded" school system, which was inaugurated as an expedient device in the early history of American education, has been one of the most persistent of all plans of school organization. It has brought about some difficult problems, yet its main virtue still seems to be that no one has yet suggested a better plan of organization. The problems it poses are so well known that it is almost trite to mention them. These problems, however, are best indicated by the terms, "failure,"

"promotion" and "grade standards." Goodlad¹ has furnished a résumé of the research and theory regarding promotion and failure and has arrived at some conclusions that appear to most teachers of experience to be sound.

Whether sending the child on up the ladder of annual promotion even though he has not achieved skills commensurate with the grade standards is

¹ Goodlad, John I., "Research and Theory Regarding Promotion and Non Promotion," *Elementary School Journal*, November 1952.

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