

An Individual Program of Reading

How can a reading program meet more nearly the wide range of interests, needs and aptitudes in any group of children? Here is one teacher's approach.

IN JUNE, a group of 36 eight- and nine-year-olds, labeled "Fourth Grade," completed a year's program in reading under a highly individualized method. The children, who had been introduced to the program the previous September, took to it like the proverbial ducks to water. The boys and girls read eagerly and prodigiously. They read for fun; they read for information. They read alone; they read together. Most of the pupils chose wisely and read widely. (One girl read 147 books.) They grew in their ability to have fun, find information, weigh comparisons, and draw conclusions. In short, they learned to make good use of what they read. Their reading was dynamic and functional.

When these boys and girls were asked which they liked better, group reading or individual reading, their reply came in a chorus, "Individual!"

The next query, "Why?" brought the following comments:

"I like individual reading because I can choose any book I want to read."

"I like this kind of reading because I can read as fast as I want to."

"Last year, everybody knew I was in the second reading group until I got good enough to move into the highest one. This year, no one knows what group I'm in because there aren't any groups!"

(This conclusion was accompanied by a smile of satisfaction.)

"I like individual reading especially because I don't have to wait for anyone else to finish a story before I can go on to a new one."

"This kind of reading is more fun because I can find out what I want to for myself. I don't have to answer questions that someone else makes up."

"I like individual reading because the teacher doesn't pass out books and say, 'Today we're going to begin to read this book together.'"

"The reason I'd rather have individual reading is because I can ask a friend to read with me or I can read alone if I'd rather."

"I like to hear about all the books the others are reading. That helps me to choose my next book sometimes."

"In this kind of reading, the teacher just helps those who need help. The rest of us don't have to learn over again what we already know."

If only these thrilling testimonials had been caught on a tape to preserve the conviction and the excitement in the young voices! Many teachers and supervisors considering an individualized reading program seem to feel that these benefits mentioned by the children ought to result. Doubts often come pouring

into their minds, however, to water the courage it takes to launch such a program. Here, "out of the mouths of babes," tumble words of sincere testimonial that should give them courage.

What Is Needed?

Just what is needed to start an individualized reading program? First, *children* who want to read better and a *teacher* who wants to teach them to read by the best method she can devise. The teacher should be willing to give the individualized plan of reading a fair trial with her children. Although the children will be happy for such an adventure, the teacher may be bothered by the uncertain feeling of not knowing all the answers in advance. There is no set pattern to follow; she must work one out as she goes. But she should have no fears. The children will help the teacher even as she helps them.

A second "must" is a supervisor who approves and encourages the teacher in undertaking this kind of program. The teacher probably has not used this method before. There is no teachers' manual to follow. The program, at least at the beginning, is bound to be of an experimental nature. The teacher's greatest asset is an understanding person who can help her evaluate the progress she is making under the new plan, whether this person be principal, supervisor or administrator.

In the third place, a wide variety of reading materials must be available. This factor alone may make or break the adventure into individualized read-

ing. In all probability, there will be on hand basal texts, supplementary readers and library books. In addition, assiduous use must be made of the public library, the bookmobile, of every possible source of books in the community. Parents, too, are usually willing to allow their children to share their books at school. Five books per child is perhaps a rough estimate for which to aim. These should range in difficulty according to the spread of abilities in the group of children using them. The assortment will include, in addition to those mentioned before, texts in the various subject matter areas such as social studies and science as well as numerous story books, easy and difficult, just for fun. There must be something to tickle everyone's taste. The selections should be changed from time to time with care being taken to retain those that some children are still looking forward to reading. At the time of change, books may be found to satisfy the particular needs or choices of certain children. As we well know, some children will read anything but some are "choosy" and it is the teacher's job to satisfy them all, while at the same time she is trying to help the fussy child broaden his reading horizon.

How To Begin

With teacher, children and supervisor in the mood, and with a reasonably good supply of books of varying difficulty and diverse interests, how shall the program be initiated? This is perhaps the most imposing barrier of all. Once hurdled, however, it soon shrinks away to nothing.

There is no right or wrong pattern. Here is the way one teacher did it. At the very beginning of the year, before any type of program was under way, she told the children that this year read-

PHYLLIS PARKIN is principal, Eastern Parkway School, State College, Pennsylvania. In addition to her work as principal, Mrs. Parkin conducts with fourth grade pupils the kind of program described in this article.

ing was going to be a little different. She explained that there would be no reading groups as such and that each person would choose his own book and read it as he was able. She talked with the pupils about choosing carefully and planning to finish the book begun. She also told them not to scorn a book that looked easy because in doing so they might cheat themselves out of a good story. (This suggestion was made with the idea of lifting pressure from the slow reader who needed to choose an easy book to read.)

The teacher further explained that: instead of calling groups of children to read with her every day, she would stop by to talk with each child about the book he was reading or to ask him to read to her. She would always be present to answer questions or to help in finding a book. From time to time, she would bring together children who needed the same kind of help and work with them in a group; this group would not remain the same, though, from one day to the next.

She asked the children if they thought it would be a good idea to keep a list of the books they had read so that at the end of the year they could see what they had accomplished in reading. The boys and girls agreed and decided that this list should contain the title of the book, its author, and just a brief summary or comment about the content.

By way of pulling together this plan and setting the project in motion, the teacher asked, "From our discussion this morning, what different things do you see that you might be doing during our reading time?" As the children replied, she wrote on the board:

1. *Choose a book to read.*
2. *Read.*
3. *List the book in your notebook.*

If a child already had a book to read at his desk, then he had no reason for going to the shelves for another. Other children, however, went a few at a time to select a book to read. On that initial day, a majority of the children settled soon to serious reading. A few were restless, however, and needed help in choosing something suited to their interests and abilities. One child simply could not find anything he liked. Here was a challenge for the teacher, to find the right story for the "choosey" child.

Perhaps no child would be ready, the teacher thought, to list a book completed on the first day. On the contrary, several rapid readers chose attractively packaged "easy" books and had several to list during the very first period.

As the year went on, teacher and children found other activities that belonged in the reading period. One by one, the following were added:

4. *Read together.*

This came to mean one of two things: either two or three children sat together just for the sake of companionship, each reading his own book; or two or more children read together from the same books by taking turns reading orally or by "playing parts."

5. *List new words and their meanings.*

The word list and functional use of the dictionary developed naturally from the often-asked question, "What does this word mean?" The readers of more advanced material began this phase of their reading earlier in the year and, of course, went much further with it than the slower readers. Some children became fascinated with words and spent a good deal of time in word study.

6. *Share the books you read.*

By this, the children meant describing a particular book to their classmates. A favorite method was that of telling

an exciting adventure or leading up to a point of suspense in the story so that half a dozen children would be begging, "May I have the book next?"

Another trick the children developed was to describe an incident or a character and ask if anyone could identify the book from the description. Some children gave a brief oral review so that a child seeking a particular type of book could tell whether this suited his taste.

Some very fine experiences in story telling, building suspense, summarizing important points, and in listening came out of this phase of the reading.

7. *Do something with what you read.*

Sometimes a story or a part of a story offered excellent material for dramatization and a child would take charge of a group for such a project.

Many times the book being read had information needed for a report or for use in other ways. Gerald needed tracing paper to get the pattern for a simple wagon he found described in a make-it-yourself book. Then he took down the directions to use at home. Diane drew illustrations of incidents or scenes that stirred her. Donny loved birds and took down information he wanted to put in his illustrated bird book. Dennis would tolerate nothing but trains for a while and he listed certain facts he wanted to keep. April and Susan found a vivid description of an oasis which impressed them so they transformed the word description into a diorama. These youngsters and many others actually put reading to work for them.

The time set aside each day for reading grew from 25 minutes in September to more than an hour in June and often started out with a listing together of these seven activities. These seldom appeared in the same order but each child would be engaged in one activity de-

pending upon which stage he had reached at the time. One item never came out on the list, perhaps because it was simply taken for granted: *Get help from the teacher.*

An individualized reading program provides a very great advantage. Children learn to read by reading. In this program, therefore, each child can do something about his own reading during all the time set aside for reading. He is also at liberty to continue his progress in any free time he has at home or at school.

Teacher's Responsibility

It is obvious that in this type of program there is a shift in emphasis in the teacher's responsibility. Instead of calling a group of children around her so that she may teach them all the same thing whether they need it or not, her duties are somewhat different. She must know what books are on the shelves and she must know enough of their contents so that she will be able to advise the children in making their selections.

She must never lack the time to encourage and actually teach the slow worker. She must never fail to inspire the gifted reader to more effective use of his reading potential. Phonics is not omitted from this type of reading program but it is given only as it is needed, not as a routine procedure for everybody. Each day, the teacher should work with as many children as possible, talking with them, reading with them, noting their difficulties. From time to time, she will group those with similar needs for specific help. Actually, she does all the kinds of teaching she would do under the group system but only for the pupils who need such help. Thus the teacher can permit other pupils to go on in their reading, never stopping until they get

tired or come to some situation they are unable to handle alone.

Evaluation of Learning

How can a teacher ascertain whether her children are learning to read better by this method? This seems to be the chief concern of those who are considering a more individualized approach.

In the first place, the teacher need not be too concerned, for example, about the nine-year-olds who are reading from the short stories of Oscar Wilde and *The Story of Fission*, except perhaps to ask, "Am I providing them with plenty of stimulating reading material?"

Then, there are certain gains she cannot help observing: freedom of choice and the joy that accompanies it; release from the tethering gait of the group; release from the stigma of the group label; a relaxed attitude toward reading; the pleasure of making reading a live, dynamic activity; more time for reading for the purposes that reading can serve; a change of emphasis from competition with the group to competition with one's self.

Sheer number of books read is some indication of the child's accomplishment although length of list alone is no proof of growth. If the difficulty of the last book read is the same as that of the first, little growth may have taken place. But if a considerable number of books has been read, some growth must surely have happened, and one measurement of progress may lie in a comparison of the reading levels of the first and the last books.

If a child reads nothing but dog stories, for example, at the beginning of the year and, toward the end, selects a narrative of family life or an adventure or science-fiction, then surely growth has taken place.

If actual scholastic achievement must be the measure of gain, a teacher can get this by giving a good standardized achievement test in reading at the beginning of the year and then again at the end. The one given at the beginning of the year can serve two purposes: it can be a guide to point up the learning-gaps she should be on the watch for in certain boys and girls; it can also indicate the range of abilities for which she must provide books. Measurement of growth is better shown through comparing what a child is reading with what he was reading than in determining how he surpasses other children in his group or those in another group.

If a teacher feels she must know whether her children have made progress comparable with that which might have been theirs through use of a set of basal readers, she may want to try to make use of some of the measuring devices which are provided for such readers.

For a teacher who is more concerned with the child than the subject, who prefers the personal rather than the mass approach, who sees value in stressing, not regimentation, but growth and development, a more individualized approach to reading, such as described in this article, may be a step in the right direction.

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