

## Individual Differences: A Precious Asset

**I**NDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES among children have sometimes been regarded as a nuisance in educational programs since they prevent uniformity in classification, curriculum, methods, and results. After we have avoided the great hazards of deprivation and damage, we may be able to move ahead farther faster by cultivating differences as a precious asset. In providing for individual differences in children in schools we need to take into account the facts, the attitudes toward these facts, and the implications and practices which follow from points of view about them. First, a quick look at some of the facts which are elaborated in articles in this issue.

A century of research has provided ample documentation of individual differences in every dimension—physical, social, emotional, and intellectual. Many of these are observable and measurable at birth and before. At each age they represent an end product in development of the numerous permutations and combinations of genetic and nurtural factors. Development must be nurtured but individual differences persist under all conditions that man is able to provide. Most widely studied have been the differences between individuals where all have had the benefit of common experiences or materials for growth. Qualitative differences between individuals may regularly be found in areas of presence and absence of experience, e. g., literate and illiterate. Well established also are intra-individual differences in the amount of various achievements present. Change with time at different rates and with unique designs is adequately documented. Continuity over the years is the

rule with systematic changes in individuals. The longer children attend school the more unlike they become in achievement in areas of common experience. If adjustments are made for the increasing averages the relative variability shows more constancy.

Consistent differences between the sexes are regularly found in many school achievements. The difference in reading age, for example, is about six months or one-half grade in favor of the girls at each age in the growing period. This makes a sufficient difference at the lower end of the distribution to load clinics and remedial classes with four or five times as many boys as girls. The difference of six months at the average is overshadowed by a standard deviation of two years and a range of ten years for each sex by the sixth grade.

It remains true, whether for biological, cultural or statistical reasons, that children viewed as wholes are more alike than when a single attribute is considered. Education should provide for the core of relative similarity as well as for the enormous variability in specific aspects.

We should not be misled into believing that we have created homogeneous categories by identifying groups of gifted and mentally retarded children. While average effects are present, the differences in children within each group remain striking. Each person still has unique qualities and patterns.

There are large differences among communities in health, economic, and social indices and these have been found to coexist with measured intellectual, behavioral, and educational characteristics

of the children. Within each city with neighborhood schools persistent systematic differences are found among them. Differences among communities are revealed in the values placed upon education, what they seek for their children, in willingness to support, and in the acceptance of changes. Schools at the best are sensitive to and build upon the varying needs presented as well as on the common requirements for a citizen.

What are some of the attitudes toward the foregoing facts? Facts are not translatable automatically into implications and practices. This is because there are also differences in attitudes toward them among responsible people. Values intrude to determine the course of action. Persons hold different hypotheses about the origin of individual differences. The bare facts of variability do not describe the process by which they came about. Extreme views may be held, for example, that all the variation among children is attributable to the environment, on the one hand, or is all attributable to heredity, on the other. The truth probably lies between. Science does not have a perfect answer to this problem in multiple causation. Social stratification and political ideologies produce emotionally colored points of view which make for programs which are different in operation. The democratic ideal of providing opportunity for maximizing the growth potential of all produces a different program than the exclusive ideal of the education of a select few.

At times the evidence on one course of action or another is unclear. The evidence may be balanced at the level of "coin tossing" or chance. The prevailing climate of opinion may precipitate a decision without valid support, and the attitudes of individuals reflect uninformed disagreement. To say that, where we do not know the answer, we should be flexi-

ble and experimental reflects a bias in favor of the scientific method.

The democratization of educational opportunities has caused a gradual shift in attitudes toward individual differences in large numbers of people from suppression, to toleration, to cultivation. If one accepts capitalization on differences *between* individuals and building on strength *within* an individual as a desirable practice for schools, certain consequences follow. The curriculum becomes broad rather than narrow. The expected achievement is at the level of the child's ability rather than at the average, norm, or standard for a group. Instructional materials with a range in difficulty are available for each class group. The marking or description of individual differences in achievement takes on more the character of a nurturing than a punishing process. Reports to parents reflect the same characteristic. With a healthy respect for individual differences, child participation in planning becomes more acceptable and needful. Mechanical common assignments give way to more dynamic practices which permit seeking, self-selection, and creative solutions. Children may properly then occupy various roles in a group, have interests which differ, and be in the process of finding a place in a society which survives and prospers because individuals fit into its varied needs.

The time has come to accept individual differences in children as a reality and to work with them without trying to blame them on anyone or to feel guilty that they exist. Resistance to easy modifiability is man's insurance of stability, and the possibility of change his hope for the future. Individual differences among people are a precious asset. A constructive program to meet them promises large returns.

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