

Individualizing Instruction in the Secondary School

A beckoning frontier of our time is that of how to individualize instruction at the secondary school level so wisely that the educational needs of all pupils will be met.

THERE IS no area of concern which might more aptly be termed an educational frontier at the secondary level than that of effectively dealing with individual differences. This problem area remains an educational frontier not because of a lack of attempts to solve it but rather because of an inherent stubbornness which resists half-hearted efforts at exploration. Many an exploratory foray has been charted; many an over-arching theory has been built. But the actual expeditions have been relatively few; the substantiated statistical data, negligible. Not since Detroit, Michigan, introduced ability grouping (X, Y, Z plan) in the early twenties has there been a widespread and consistent attempt to explore this frontier.

Yet the very fact that vocal segments of the society are demanding that more educational attention be devoted to the gifted, the talented, and the exceptional student; that the student be given added orientation to science for the purpose of recruitment; and that either homogeneous or heterogeneous grouping be given precedent gives evidence that the frontier does exist. Were there not these demands for attention to the needs of special individuals, it might be assumed that instruction is being so wisely individualized that the needs of all students are being met completely.

What then are the practices that attempt to push back this frontier?

These practices fall conveniently into two major groupings. The first group contains those that may be integrated into any existing program; the second, those whose implementation requires some unique facility either in terms of a building or of a time structure.

The Individual in a Regular Program

From the many efforts to individualize instruction that could belong within the first grouping, nine will be discussed here.

1. Individualized instruction is fostered by the concept of a classroom teacher who functions both in the area of instruction and of guidance.¹ This concept is predicated on the philosophy that a need of each individual is to preserve the self not only as it exists at any given instant in its life span but also as it projects itself into the future. The preservation of the anticipated self requires the strengthening of those qualities and attributes which are essential to the maintenance of the potential self within its area of operation. It has been stated that the basic human need is "the preservation and enhancement of the phenomenal

¹ Florence D. Cleary, Alice M. Davis and Arnold R. Meier. *Individual and Group Guidance*. Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1953, p. 3.

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self.”² As alert administrators, recognizing this basic need, become aware of the fact that guidance is not a function of the school which is to be provided only at widely dispersed intervals when there are special problems to be solved, they place the guidance function with the classroom teacher. Once the classroom teacher begins to assume the guidance responsibility, he develops a new awareness of the needs of the individual student and in turn provides an educational program better fitted to these needs.

2. Individualized instruction is improved through the use of teacher-pupil planning. Here the teacher and the pupils work together to determine the goals and objectives not only for the whole class but also for each individual in the class. This planning together to determine content, method and evaluation directs all attention to the needs of the individual. The teacher who carefully abides by the plans thus made must of necessity make the instruction appropriate to goals of each student.

3. Individualized instruction is secured by having homogeneity within heterogeneity. It is not the province of this discussion to take issue or give support to the cause of those who advocate either homogeneous or heterogeneous grouping. It is apparent that both factions find some supportable evidence to make their claim for preeminence justifiable. Because of this it seems logical to assume that both patterns of grouping have contributions to make to the individual student. To guarantee the benefits to be secured from each of these there is a growing practice to have ever changing

² Donald Snygg and Arthur W. Combs. *Individual Behavior*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949, p. 58.

homogeneous work and study groups formed within a heterogeneously grouped class. Thus it is possible to have mind against challenging mind and at the same time have complete catholicity of peer relationships. Within a single classroom and class period, it is further possible that homogeneity can be obtained for one undertaking by intellectual ability; for another, by interest; and for a third, by social purpose.

As students become members of one group for a specific purpose and join a new group once the purpose is obtained, and as they serve as members of the total group, both homogeneity and heterogeneity are secured. Once this result is secured the total needs of the individual student are more nearly met.

4. Individualized instruction may result from some form of school wide system of grouping. There still appears to be an effort to develop some magical means for grouping so that like minds and abilities can race forward without the drag of the less able. These schemes for grouping range from such simple techniques as placing the student into a group as a result of his score on a so called intelligence test to an infinitely more complex group-factor technique such as the one developed by David Stewart,³ who determines a grouping quotient by equating several growth patterns. Each of these schemes has as its basic assumption the belief that better individual instruction results from some type of homogeneity.

5. Individualized instruction can be gained through the offering of a wide variety of electives or of different curricula. This device for meeting the needs and abilities of the student provides a grouping which results from the student's making appropriate selections from with-

³ Reported at the 1957 ASCD Convention in St. Louis by David K. Stewart, director of curriculum, Iowa City, Iowa.

in a multiplicity of elective subjects or series of subject areas. The true value of such an effort to gain individualization depends upon the student's ability to analyze his own needs, skills and aptitudes and his willingness to choose wisely.

The electives may range from foreign languages to industrial arts, from home and family living to creative writing, and from typing to sculpturing. However, there may be a parallel pattern of curricula such as business education, college preparatory, industrial arts and so on from which students may make selections.

This approach is used more at the senior high school than at junior high school level and has its greatest success where it is coupled with a highly trained counseling corps. Basic also is the necessity for a persistent follow through with each student so that changes can be made when they are essential to better serve the individual student.

6. Individualization of instruction may be obtained through clubs and cocurricular activities. While this method does not answer the need within the individual classrooms, it does offer the student a chance to satisfy recognized differences by means of participation in such activities as clubs, service groups and recreational programs.

7. Individualized instruction may be improved by offering a variety of units within a subject matter area rather than by creating new course offerings. The inclusion of many units within a subject matter area is a very real effort to analyze the social scene to determine those experiences which every student should have and to distribute these experiences throughout the curriculum. This then assures each student the opportunity of having these essential experiences at a level which is appropriate to his degree

of maturity and his ability to comprehend. In addition to this it provides for a wider range of opportunities for experience within the relatively confined limits of normal course offerings.

8. Individualized instruction is improved through school-work programs. The cooperative work program, as it is often called, provides an opportunity for the student to get a controlled work experience which is suited to his native endowments and his previous training. Students usually attend school half days and work half days. There are, however, many variations within the administration of such a program.

Here again the success of this program, in terms of the student, depends much upon the insights of the teachers and the wise use of the counseling services.

9. Individualized instruction may be obtained through a wide use of a variety of materials. At no prior time has there been such a diversity of materials nor has there been such an honest attempt to produce materials which fit the specific needs of all types of students. Texts are written for different levels of reading abilities. Textual materials are supplemented by films, filmstrips, records, and demonstration kits. Firms are devoting millions of dollars to the production of free and inexpensive materials to be used in the classrooms. Television, radio, the press, and film companies are offering their services and products to the schools for educational purposes.

Too, the community has become an educational laboratory where youth may learn at firsthand the inner workings of a society. The people of the community have become a great educational resource. The vigilant teacher utilizes all of these materials to more nearly meet the great spread of differences within the classroom.

Adjusting the Program to the Individual

These nine means of individualizing instruction can be used within any classroom or school system. There are, however, at least three efforts to further the individualization of instruction which function more effectively when either the building or the time schedule is adjusted to fit the program.

1. Individualized instruction results from the use of the core, unified, or fused program. Of the many virtues which have been credited to the "core program" probably none is more valid than the one which asserts that it provides an opportunity for small groups of students to live with one teacher a much longer period of time per day. This in turn provides time for the teacher to know better each student, to plan with the students appropriate activities, and to devote more time to each individual.

The planning committee composed of both school and lay people for junior high schools in Kalamazoo, Michigan,⁴ accepting the philosophy that the junior high schools should be committed to general education, recommended among other things that a three hour block of time be allotted in a single unit. During this time thirty students would be with one teacher for their English, social studies, and guidance experiences. In addition to this, art and music consultant help would be provided for the teacher of this three hour block. While there are several other aspects of the program which are unique, the single part of the program of major importance here is the making of the junior high school program guidance oriented. With the allotting of a time equivalent to one class

⁴ "Report of the Educational Planning Committee for Junior High Schools." Revised June 21, 1956. Mimeographed. Kalamazoo Public Schools.

period a day to guidance, the teacher is free to do both group and individual guidance and instruction at the precise moment when it is needed. This use of school time, a use which has its counterpart in many cities in the nation, is an attempt to encourage the teacher to use better his skill to tailor a program to fit each student.

2. Individualized instruction is promoted by designing flexible buildings so that the house, family, or school-within-a-school plan can be instituted. Here the concept of providing individual status and security by making each student a member of a small, permanent educational house or family, tends to foster individual instruction. The team of teachers who work within the house become better informed about the students within the house and tend to provide not only a better program for the group but also for the individuals within the group.

This effort at improving instruction has become a reality in several places. Examples of the arrangement in varying forms can be found in the new high schools at Royal Oak, Michigan, and Fairfield, Connecticut, and in the remodeled high school at Evanston, Illinois.

3. Individualized instruction can be obtained through a lengthening of the class period and through increasing the number of courses taken. By lengthening the time allotted to each class period and eliminating the study hall now common to many high schools, it becomes possible to satisfy accrediting agencies with fewer meetings of a class per week. The student is thus free to carry more subjects during a year and enrich his educational program. When counselors and teacher conceive of the total scope of such a shift, every effort is made to insure maximum individual growth for each student. A notable example of this plan successfully

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individual development, they will be left in the same room; if not, they may be placed in different rooms. A balance of men and women teachers is rather consistently maintained from Grade 4 upward so that it is possible for the child without a father, for example, to be placed with a man teacher. Alternating the children between men and women teachers is considered when feasible. A room that, out of necessity, has two grades, should have fewer children per grade than the so-called "straight" classes and by and large should be freer from personality problems.

The "divided reading program" also has been tried recently in this school. This is a plan by which half the class comes at nine o'clock for skill teaching in reading for one hour. At ten o'clock the other half of the class joins those who are already there, for all other phases of the school program. Those who came at nine o'clock go home at two in the afternoon and the half that came at ten o'clock remains until three for reading skills. The

individual attention that can be given and the relaxed atmosphere that is present have made this arrangement a favored one by teachers and pupils. Two parent evaluations have indicated that they too favor the help that can be given in this program. Tests revealed nine months' growth in reading word recognition during a seven month period, and eleven and one-half months' growth in paragraph reading during the same period of time.

It would be impossible not to mention parent-teacher conferences and their direct relationship to an individualized school program. Broad units of work, accurate records to be used for guidance purposes on all phases of a child's development, multiple-text selections, and special interest groups bear the same close relationship to this individualized program.

Much progress has been made but the real challenge always lies with school people who believe and act in a manner that says, "It can be done."

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in operation is to be found in the high school at East Lansing, Michigan. Racine, Wisconsin, has also evolved a plan whereby the student carries more subjects and consequently has a program which fits his abilities and needs.

These three methods of attempting to improve the total high school curriculum⁵ demand some daring in use of buildings

⁵ See also G. Robert Koopman's proposal in "A New Theoretical Approach to Secondary School Planning" in *The Nation's Schools*, December 1953; or "The Random Falls Idea" as described by Archibald B. Shaw in *The School Executive* for March 1956.

and time. But those who have dared have produced programs which hold promise.

Other approaches are still in a proposal form and will take even more vision and courage to put into operation.

The individualization of instruction is still an educational frontier. If there were to be made an exhaustive study of present theory and practice, if from this study a new organization of theory were developed, if the new theory were tested on a broad base, and statistics gathered, and if an operational plan were developed and implemented, such a frontier would rapidly disappear.

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