

Curriculum Research

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Individualized Reading in First Grade

THAT individuals differ in ability and learn at various rates is a well accepted fact. Various attempts have been made to organize the school and the class to better provide instruction on the level of each learner. The common approach to this problem in the elementary school has been, and continues to be, grouping children within the classroom according to ability. For example, the teacher plans to work with three, four or, at the most, five reading groups. Surely no one will deny that such a plan represents a giant step in the right direction—away from the outmoded attempt to teach all children in a classroom how to read from the same basic reader. Yet advocates of the small group plan are quick to agree that it does not, in the strictest sense of the word, individualize reading instruction.

The paragraphs that follow give a description of one teacher's efforts to try out or experiment with a plan for individualizing her first grade reading program. She was dissatisfied and somewhat bored with the "traditional" reading groups that she had been teaching. Consequently, when she heard of an approach to individualized reading discussed during a summer session, she started thinking about what this idea could mean in terms of her specific school situation.

She outlined on paper the procedure she wished to follow with the hypothesis: To the degree that children are taught individually to read, their achievement in reading will be more consistent with their ability to learn. During the pre-school planning days she outlined her plan to her principal and staff of fellow teachers and received their approval and support. Her next step was to secure permission to carry on the experiment from the supervisors involved and from the Director of Curriculum and Instructional Services.

In assigning children to the various first grade teachers an honest attempt was made to see that the "experimental group" was equal to two other first grade groups. Readiness test scores, sex, and previous school experiences were considered in determining placement.

An Emerging Study

In the "experimental group" the teacher introduced reading to the total group with the use of the "big book," a basic first pre-primer. In this way a small sight vocabulary was taught to the total group. Each child was then given an individual copy of the same first pre-primer and was told that that was his book to take home and read. A note from the teacher, similar to the following, was sent home with the child:

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Dear Mrs. Jones:

John will be bringing a reader home nearly every afternoon. Please listen to him read at least 15 minutes each evening. Please tell him promptly and politely the words he does not know.

Your cooperation will help him to be a better reader. Please check to see that he returns his book to school each morning.

Thank you for your continued interest.

At school the children began reading aloud while the teacher moved about through the room helping them. At first she could spend only about a minute with each child. She "promptly and politely" told them words they did not know. Children were asked to raise their hand or to ask their neighbor for help if they did not know a word. The latter method was facilitated by a seating arrangement which enabled the more capable children to help those less able.

The time for reading was increased

gradually until the class was reading from three quarters of an hour to an hour a day. As the semester progressed and as children grew more confident, they were encouraged to read softly until eventually they were able to read silently except for the time the teacher was with them. Operating concurrently with the individual reading instruction and considered as an essential part of it was what the teacher chose to call a composition program. Each day a new subject with additional vocabulary was introduced and stories were written by the children. This program supplemented the reading program in teaching important word attack skills, including phonetics.

As each child finished the book he had been reading, the teacher checked his ability in word recognition and his comprehension by pointing to various words throughout the book and by asking

questions. When the teacher thought the child was ready to progress, he was given a book on the next level. If the child was not ready to go on, the teacher encouraged him to reread the book or she supplied him with a book on the same level from another series. In this manner the child progressed at his own speed and was not held back or pushed on by other children in the room. Before long the class was reading in 15 to 25 different books.

Results

A record was kept of the books each child read and the dates they were completed. Toward the end of the year one child had read six books while another had read forty-six. A few children were still reading on a pre-primer level, while others were reading on the third grade level. Each child had progressed to the degree he was capable during the year.

A standardized reading test was administered at the close of school to all the first grade children. Test results of the "experimental group" were compared with the two control groups. It was of interest to discover that in terms of average reading the median score of the "experimental group" was the same as the median score of one of the control groups and only two months above that of the second control group. Test results indicated that the individualized reading program was neither more nor less effective than the "traditional" method. There was, however, some subjective evidence that children in the "experimental group" may have developed greater interest in reading. This was observed by parents commenting on the tremendous interest of the children in reading road signs, billboards, newspaper headlines, and library books. These observations were considered inconclusive, but parents'

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satisfaction with the program was encouraging to the teacher.

Study of the results of standardized tests of her children led the teacher to conclude that the area of comprehension needed strengthening. Anecdotal records indicated that the children had developed a high interest in reading, and the test revealed that they had acquired a sizable reading vocabulary. In planning for the next year, it seemed clear that the approach should be altered to provide for some small group work in addition to the individualized program. Consequently the teacher planned to reserve certain textbooks at the various levels to be used periodically with small groups for the purpose of developing additional skill in word attack and comprehension.

Therefore, in line with the information gathered, the original plan was modified. The teacher set forth on the second year in her attempt to develop an individualized reading program that would more adequately help the children she teaches to achieve on a level commensurate with their individual ability.

—HELEN HEACOCK HILSON, *first grade teacher, Citrus Grove Elementary School, Miami, Florida; and* GLENN G. THOMAS, *professor of education, University of Miami, and principal of the Henry S. West Laboratory School, Coral Gables, Florida.*

Pressures

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class sections commensurate with their abilities.

In reviewing the influences affecting today's high school curriculum a number of persistent questions arise. While adults cry for schools to "beef up" the

program and to "crack down" on students, labor pushes for a 35 hour work week and TV commercials insist we should "live modern," have fun, enjoy life, travel, and take it easy. How can we expect students to sacrifice their time to study diligently in a society of adults that is self-indulging, ease-oriented, and fun-loving?

When Congress decided that tax money should be spent to insure the preparation of greater numbers of scientists, what far reaching precedents were established? When our present bumper crop of war babies graduates from college, might we have too many scientists? Will our government then find it necessary to set quotas on individuals to be trained in specific fields? In our present cold war, how much of Russian methods can we afford to adopt? Is our primary educational consideration still to meet the needs of individual pupils or are we yielding basic ideals in an attempt to meet the needs of changing emergencies?

Is today's basic educational objective the preferential training of physical scientists? Will any voices of protest be heard above the jingling of federal dollars in local school coffers crying out to "Help capable students go to college, help provide needed buildings, help with adequate salaries, but don't infiltrate the local school curriculum!"

The continuity of the secondary school curriculum is being subjected to many pressures. These influences must be identified and analyzed both for basic motives and ultimate effects on education in a free society. An appropriate high school curriculum individually designed for boys and girls is being challenged. Will changes in our philosophy of educational control result in ultimate modifications of American freedom?

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