Methods of Individualization . . .

In Elementary School

Ten ways in which instruction is geared to the individual child are suggested here.

CHRIS is six feet and one inch tall today in his stocking feet. He’s a solid 185 pounds. He won his letter in football last fall; he’s a three-sport boy because baseball is his favorite and basketball is fun. This summer he took up golf. Already, he out-drives his father and seems to out-birdie his mother whenever she has the good fortune to par. He’s at the top of his class in social studies, and that’s about it! No, there’s something more. Chris should have been entering junior high school this year, but he is half-way through instead. You see, Chris is only 12 years old. But someone felt it would be better if he skipped the second grade. Somehow he didn’t belong there. Chris likes the world, but there are days when he moans: “Gee! Dad, it’s tough being an adult child!”

Chris is different. But so are his friends. They differ in dentition, visual maturity, language development, sexual maturity, emotional stability, character traits, chronological age, and mental ability. Everybody knows that the most startling fact about being a human being is human individuality. Individuality is, at the same time, the most charming reality. Educators speak reverently of the sacred personalities of children.

There is a doctrine of individual differences which modern teachers acknowledge but frequently ignore. It is difficult for human beings to see others except in terms of their own self images. Teachers may attempt to convey a fact or concept to an immature mind in a way that is comfortable and comprehensible for the teacher. It may be exceedingly difficult for the teacher to accept the reality of confusion or misunderstanding on the part of the learner. Yet we must remind ourselves that 30 children may learn 30 different things in 30 different ways each time the

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Roy Patrick Wahle is assistant superintendent of schools, Bellevue Public Schools, Bellevue, Washington.
teacher helps to develop a group experience in a classroom.

Methods of individualization in the elementary school must be feasible, applicable and appropriate. Individualization of the guidance and instructional program is more a matter of spirit and atmosphere than it is pronunciation and rule. But there are marks by which one may discern the elementary school and the school district which are more concerned about children than about things.

**Marks of Individualization**

Let us examine some of these marks which denote that individualization is paramount: (a) the library is the center of learning, (b) there are numerous approaches to similar learnings or conceptualizations, (c) there is flexible grouping based upon defensible criteria, (d) attention is directed to the exceptional, (e) a class is a group of separate human beings, (f) guidance nourishes curriculum and curriculum serves guidance, (g) classes or instructional groups tend to be small, (h) informed generalists direct the school's administration, (i) a respect for scientific inquiry and experimentation prevails, (j) parents and patrons help define the goals and purposes of education, but professional educators define and designate the methods and techniques.

*The library is the center of learning.* The printed symbol is the most efficient device ever invented by man to transmit his culture and to broaden personal experiences and understandings. Better elementary schools early establish, by symbol, facility and practice, the central importance of books and their contents. Individualization in reading and research is a basic necessity of our times. Full-time year-around library service at each elementary school is a practical goal.

But a library is more than books. It should encompass all instructional materials and devices which will enrich meanings. A librarian is the essential member of the teaching staff whose knowledge of books and instructional materials will enhance the motivational and learning quality of any lesson or individual searching which children must pursue in order to grow in understanding.

*There are numerous approaches to similar concepts.* Chuck is four years old. He recognizes the symbols of our number language. He learned them while playing cards with his sister. He can count past 23, but Chuck does not understand fully what these pleasantries are all about. If he is sent for six spoons he may bring nine.

The concepts which are symbolized by the numeral "6" must be approached in many meaningful and interesting ways. This requires creativity, ingenuity and patience. Better elementary schools use the community and its resources. Interesting people and places are anticipated and visited. Art serves music and music serves art; sharing periods, science tables, work benches and outdoor education contribute to a living structure of education. When does the picture of a horse in the reading text actually become, for the child, the real Nellie at the farm or zoo? When do the hardships and triumphs of the pioneer woman become attributes of a flesh and blood mother? Many differing experiences which may lead to a similarly important concept may help conceptualization enrich a mode of living. A concept then
becomes alive through the activity it inspires.

There is flexible grouping based upon defensible criteria. Wherever children gather together there will be grouping. Good elementary schools concern themselves with the criteria used for determining the varying instructional groups which are inevitable in mass education. Old forms are consistently questioned in the light of deeper knowledge about human growth and development. There is nothing sacred about 25 or 30 or 10 within a group. Neither chronological age nor the intelligence quotient taken alone offers a legitimate basis for grouping, yet we persist with the graded structure of the elementary school or select “gifted children” by a score on a test! Research again and again supports the negative value of retention, but we maintain a blind faith that repetition of unlearned material will guarantee its comprehension!

It appears possible that some form of ungraded program, when maturation and its manifestations of reading readiness and reading ability are major concerns, will better answer the perplexing problem of grouping in the primary school. Does it automatically follow, however, that an ungraded program necessarily provides a sound structure for grouping at the intermediate level?

We believe that when a child first learns to relate in a social circumstance we should provide him with an understandable and manageable situation. Why, then, do we continue to generalize that six-year-old boys are as ready to read and do the work that schools expect as are six-year-old girls?

Bellevue found, in a comprehensive study of its elementary children, that many of the boys who were above average in intelligence persisted in low reading groups through all six elementary grades! Surely, the grouping criteria needed to be examined. They were then examined and, consequently, the Continuous Growth Program was introduced as an experiment.

Two years have elapsed. Evidence is accumulating which indicates that if children are allowed to proceed at their own rate through the primary grades, reading problems are reduced and individual self-confidence is enhanced. No longer need children sit next to children simply because nature decreed that they would be born in the same year. Human growth is related to a calendar, but not as intimately as our elementary graded classifications might imply. There are better criteria for grouping than birthdays.

In the primary grades, a single criterion for grouping might be the level of demonstrated ability to read. The ability to read is not singular. Rather, it appears to be a reflection of complexities captured, in the primary years, at least, by the multiple phenomena of maturation and growing self-realization.

Bellevue’s experimental Continuous Growth Program has substituted nine levels for the primary grades. The levels correspond roughly to the existent levels of the prepared readers beginning with the pre-primer. The ninth level is especially designed for rapid learners. Theoretically, a child may require from two to four years to complete the eight or nine levels before he enters the fourth grade. The majority will require three years of effort.

We do not claim that the Continuous Growth Program is original or unique, but, for Bellevue, it is indigenous. It grew out of local inquiries and developing insights. It is a part of our search
Art serves music and music serves art. (Mrs. Sherry McManus, First Grade Teacher, Woodridge Elementary School, Bellevue Public Schools, Bellevue, Washington)

for a better individualization of instruction in the elementary school.

We believe that the Continuous Growth Program, through its simple structure, may serve to respond appreciably to the perplexing problems of retention, acceleration, exceptional children, continuous failure, repetition of materials, grouping by chronological age, flexible grouping, fixed standards of achievement within a stated time, and good mental health practices in the classroom.

Attention is directed to the exceptional. There is a thought, yet unproved, that the quality of a school's service to all its pupils is related to the quality of its efforts with the handicapped and with the gifted. Better elementary schools look forward to the day when they may offer a complete community educational service to all children in their attendance areas.

Something inhumane happens to a child who leaves home to become institutionalized in his elementary years when he need not have been sent away. Rapid learners should have the opportunity to learn rapidly; if the ungraded primary will assist, let us examine it. If the ungraded intermediate will assist, let us likewise examine it. Let us not forget, however, that all children.

November 1959
whether gifted or not, must have opportunities to work and plan together somewhere and sometime in their school careers. Mutual appreciation and understanding will preclude factional suspicions.

Democracy may be affected by our methods for individualization in the elementary schools.

A class is a group of human beings. Unfortunately, the exigencies of mass education have tended to equate a class to a cubicle in a building. The four walls of the classroom must become unlimited if quality instruction is desired. A class is a vital social group with important subgroups. It is a miniature society which the alert teacher quickly perceives and utilizes.

Teachers must recognize isolates, subgroups, the total group and all the internal interactions. Attitudes toward school, toward vocational choice and toward life and its purpose may be affected by these interactions. The teacher of a group of human beings must be as eager about each child individually as he is about what is being planned and learned.

Guidance nourishes curriculum and curriculum serves guidance. There is a unity between guidance and curriculum which thwarts attempts at separation. The changing nature of society and its shifting demands are consequential but surely subtle. An elementary school will study the varying degrees of knowledge acquired by pupils outside the school, the impact of TV, travel, community displays and events.

Bellevue recently shifted downward the teaching of many scientific concepts. School people recognized that environmental influences now apparently produce readiness and motivation for the learnings earlier than was believed appropriate a few years ago.

We know more than ever before about the symptoms of predelinquency, and other undesirable deviations which appear in some elementary school children. Better schools are attempting to put this knowledge to use in realistic elementary guidance programs. A psychologically oriented guidance program will translate a child's poor academic achievement or questionable discipline into helpful psychological interpretations. Teachers may then be helped to work more closely with the reality of the child's world rather than with an inaccurate opinion.

The understandings about children which enlightened guidance practices develop must affect the school's curriculum development. Otherwise, there may be danger that the school environment, which may unwittingly help produce deviations in some children, will proceed without correction.

Classes or instructional groups tend to be small. The existence of elementary classes beyond the reasonable limitation of 30 pupils displays a disregard on the part of patrons for the efforts of teachers to individualize instruction. It is widely known that research has not produced conclusive evidence concerning maximum sizes for various instructional purposes. Hence, it must be surmised that better elementary schools will continue to group for various purposes without a preconceived limitation upon size. But if due regard is to be maintained for the important personal relationships which should be established between teacher and pupil, excessive numbers in groups cannot be
acceptable. The sacred personality of
the child and his uniqueness are neg-
lected if the teacher-pupil ratio enlarges
beyond human endurance.

_Informed generalists direct the school's
administration._ An administrator of an
elementary school who does not perceive
and help teachers design with him the
entire pattern of guidance and instruc-
tional efforts in the elementary school
will distort the children's learning. It is
advantageous for a principal to have spe-
cialized in some scholarly pursuit in
order to help establish a refined appreci-
cation of the services of scholarship and
for the sake of his self-acceptance. An
administrator of an elementary school,
and, equally important, the adminis-
trator of school districts, must feel and
promote the meanings and values of
the humanities as well as the sciences.
Administrators must be generalists in
order to accomplish this approach to uni-
versality!

Central to everything the educator
does is the child. The educational plan
for children determines the nature of
the financial plan and the building pro-
gram for education. Education is a
community effort involving parents, min-
isters, teachers, youth organizations and
other individuals and groups.

An administrator who merely tolerate,
certain segments of the elementary pro-
gram should examine the reasons for
his feeling. He may need to examine the
nature of his preparation and do some-
thing about omissions within his prepa-
ration if he is responding in an emotional
context only.

_A respect for scientific inquiry and
experimentation prevails._ Mother trav-
eled in her Conestoga wagon between
Iowa and South Dakota no faster than
Julius Caesar or George Washington
would have traveled the same route. Not
long ago she flew from the West Coast
to New York City in an overnight, re-
laying flight. Every generation today
sees more technical change than all
previous generations saw.

No elementary school's staff can ignore
the frontiers of science or its methods of
inquiry. A good school examines new
possibilities even if they appear to be
mere variations of older forms. Changing
conditions may suggest the adaptation
of older forms as well as the creation of
new forms. Pilot projects are stimulat-
ing to teachers; whether they produce
changes in program or not, teachers are
better in instruction when they know
that they are respected as professional
persons.

Parents and patrons help define the
goals and purposes of education but the
professional educator defines and desig-
nates the methods and techniques. Edu-
cators cannot permit the erosion of
their attempts at professionalization.
Parents who want to tell educators how
to teach are about as unwelcome in the
school scene as they would be if they
attempted to direct the surgeon's activ-
ities in the operating room of a respected
hospital.

Parents know what they want for
their children, and they must be heard
and heeded. Educators are obligated to
inform parents concerning the expansive
panorama of society and its varying de-
mands upon children and their schools.

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mentary schools today have been sug-
gested. Will they help you determine
whether your school and your school
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dren than about things?