

Norman K. Hamilton

Providing for Individual Differences

AMERICAN elementary schools are well into a period of renewed interest and concern for the quality of education. The resulting activity has taken the form of establishing special classes, the re-establishing of so-called homogeneous groups, and emphasis on academic achievement. Sometimes schools, in their effort to meet current criticisms, are moving too rapidly without reexamining fundamental principles of sound educational practices.

Social Values as a Basis for School Practice

Philosophical and practical problems must be solved before practices which have been hastily adopted to meet current pressures can be evaluated. Schools need a set of criteria upon which to base their evaluation of practices. These criteria must be founded upon the values of the society the schools are to serve, the nature of children and how they learn, and the findings of research in the field of educational practices.

The common elements of public opinion become the values of a society. Certain of these values are of paramount importance to education. Many writers and speakers who are gaining national attention are, in the opinion of this writer, advocating school policies which are contrary to basic values held by the American people. As one reads some of the current criticisms of the schools, one might question whether or not the basic values of our culture are still dominant or whether public opinion has changed to the extent that the tenets of our democracy have been modified through a mass shift in public opinion.

Three values which have long been held by Americans are:

1. Each individual has a right to equal opportunity to develop his full potential.
2. Each individual should become a good citizen and be prepared to participate at some level in the democratic process.

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3. Each individual is of equal worth and has a right to the recognition of his worth.

The values under which schools operate can best be reexamined by testing the public opinion from which values are derived. In a recent survey of the opinions of 1500 parents in the state of Oregon on the question of individual differences, 90 percent expressed the belief that individual children who have special instructional needs should receive special opportunities, outside the regular classroom if necessary, in order to help them reach their full potential (3). This can be interpreted as an overwhelming support of the belief in the development of each individual according to his ability.

In the same survey, the parents reaffirmed the idea of the worth of each individual through their unwillingness to classify individuals as superior, exceptionally endowed, or gifted. The reasons given for this opinion were that some words, when associated with individuals, are value judgments and tend to place more worth on one category of persons than on another. On the other hand, the parents would favor giving opportunities for special interest work, advanced work, or enriched work to those pupils who through diligence or native ability are able to profit through such opportunities. The difference here is fine but fundamental. The approval is for the opportunities without classification of individuals as members or nonmembers of select groups.

The need for preparation of all individuals for efficiency as citizens is reaffirmed by the fact that the public recognizes that there should be excellence in all fields of endeavor, and that high talent should not be directed solely into one or two specialized fields at the expense of other opportunities. The public would include special opportunities in the fields

of mechanics, art, creative writing, music, social leadership as well as the academic subject fields(3). This reaffirms the faith in the need for well-rounded individuals resulting from a well-rounded educational program.

Each of these expressions of opinion can be interpreted as confirming the values upon which educational philosophy is based:

1. That each individual should have a balanced school program for effective participation as a citizen in our society

2. That each individual should have an opportunity to develop to his optimum potential

3. That each individual is of equal worth

4. That each individual should have an opportunity to develop his full potential through specialized opportunities according to his needs, ability and present level of achievement.

The social values of American society are consistent with practices of flexible grouping, a balanced program of studies, and the recognition of the worth of each individual regardless of his native ability.

The American people recognize that individuals differ in their needs and abilities and that the schools must and should provide special opportunities for children who have special needs. These opportunities would be for both the slow and the advanced, the handicapped and the abundantly endowed. One group would not be served at the expense of the other, yet no school could claim to be fulfilling its obligations without recognizing and providing for individual differences.

To foster wholesome respect for each individual, the American public generally would avoid labeling children. This means that schools should help children maintain their principal identity with heterogeneous class groups. Special op-

portunities would be in addition to or in place of some activity provided for all. Children lose their identity with special groups if they are members of many groups. Some leave one group for work on a school paper; others participate in a chorus; still others may be in a remedial reading class or a science class for the gifted, but all should have a home base, the homeroom.

A significant finding in analyzing the values of the American people is that the provision for differentiated experiences adjusted to the ability of children is consistent with democratic ideals. The objectionable element in this practice is that value judgments are sometimes associated with individuals in special groups. The practice of grouping and regrouping for specific activities within and outside the regular classroom overcomes the objectionable social features of grouping and permits the schools to provide a balanced and appropriate program for each child.

Understanding How Children Learn

If schools are to continue to fulfill the American goal, they must continue to provide for all the children of all the people. They must continue to provide special training in the creative fields of art, music, creative writing, and drama as well as the regularly recognized academic fields and physical education. This type of balanced program is best suited to prepare children for maximum citizenship responsibilities and full, successful living.

What does research tell us about individual differences and how they can be met? Individual differences are the variations that exist among individuals grouped on any single measure or trait. Physical differences among individuals

are often obvious. Physical limitations are accepted by most persons, and no child would be expected to perform a physical feat which he obviously is not able to perform. Differences in mental ability have often been overlooked by the public but are now beginning to be better understood.

There has been a tendency for schools to rely too heavily upon IQ as the sole measure of ability. IQ's, as measured by tests, are composites of scores of various types of performances: memory, word fluency, perception of special relationships, quantitative thinking, and various reasoning exercises(4). Identical IQ's in two individuals will not indicate identical strengths and weaknesses to do various tasks. Pupils differ one from another in any single ability, and any individual has differing abilities with respect to the various component parts which make up his aptitudes.

Trait differences refer to the variations in different abilities possessed by an individual. Therefore, grouping children on the single criterion of IQ overlooks the trait differences within an individual. IQ is only one measure of individual differences as related to ability to do school work.

The areas of interest, attitudes, motivation and drive also influence performance. Each person visualizes himself as successful or unsuccessful in various roles. The child acquires many of his self concepts through experiences in various situations. As a child acts, persons react to him. If reactions toward him are favorable, he will tend to visualize himself as successful in those situations. If the reactions toward him are generally unfavorable, he is apt to visualize himself as unsuccessful in those roles and therefore will modify his own self concepts. The total of his actions and reactions

results in his own personality judgment of himself. It is known that a child's feeling toward himself influences his achievement.

Interest is also a strong factor in achievement. Tests of interest seem to indicate that young children are interested in many things, and that as they grow older they become more selective and specialize in certain interests. Therefore, the development of interest seems to be a selective, elimination process rather than an expanding process(5). Interest is related to a person's concept of himself in terms of the various roles he plays to his own satisfaction. As an example, a child who has unsuccessful experiences in music may reject music and may not include it as one of the areas of his interest. If, on the other hand, he has successful experiences in athletic events, he may develop an interest and specialize in this field of endeavor.

Aspirations are related to the factors of self concept, interest, ability and experience. Most children have a tendency to aspire high—that is, they are aware early in life of the positions in society which hold prestige. As they grow older, toward the end of the high school career, they may become relatively more realistic in their aspirations and tend to set goals which they feel they have a chance of reaching. Children will tend to fix their occupational aspirations according to their background(2). Thus, two children of equal ability will aspire at different levels. Motivations and aspirations are closely associated with success. Given a minimum ability, a child of lesser ability who is highly motivated often achieves more than a child of higher endowment who is not highly motivated.

Understanding the nature of children and how they learn includes the knowledge that children differ one from an-

other in ability, in motivation, in self understanding, and in trait variability. Each child brings with him to each task a set of attitudes and drives. As these tasks are performed, he modifies his attitudes and motives, and adds to his fund of skills and knowledge. This is part of the learning process.

Schools must organize their programs to capitalize on the curiosity of young children and their natural drives for success. Children come to school with many interests. These interests should be kept alive by providing broad opportunities for their expression through reading, artistic expression, and achievement. Children should be given as many opportunities as possible to develop wholesome self-respect through chances to succeed. As children mature, they will naturally withdraw their interest from some fields and refine and develop their interests in other fields(5). Good schools will permit children to keep many of their interests alive and to develop a variety of these interests.

Children who come from limited environments have had little opportunity to visualize themselves in certain roles. They need broadening experiences which will provide them with new horizons.

Children who have high IQ's tend to excel in many subjects. On the other hand, trait variability within the individual should be recognized. Some children of moderate general ability as measured by an IQ test, but who possess keen interest and diligent work habits, excel in fields beyond their normal expectations. This is all to the good. Schools should not consider these pupils as "overachievers," since their motivation and attitudes are part of their composite ability to achieve.

The total educational experience will assist each child to assess his own

strengths and weaknesses and help him to plan his own educational goals in later years. Thus each child can develop a wholesome self concept in harmony with his ability. This can be partially achieved through opportunities to participate with many different groups of children of varied abilities.

A child who is always at the "top of his class" in academic work may find that he is less able in art expression, or only average in a special class for advanced science or math instruction. Another child who receives below average marks in academic subjects may excel in art expression. Wholesome self concepts are developed through experiences which challenge but offer opportunity for success.

Research in Grouping Practices

Methods and procedures should be developed or refined to help teachers improve their observation and judgment in identifying the total capabilities of children. Principals can help their teachers in looking beyond obvious differences among children to other related factors which also make up the total of each child's capacities. They will help teachers make opportunities and experiences available so that each child will develop and maintain a wholesome personality judgment in keeping with his potential.

Research into the various methods of grouping—homogeneous vs. heterogeneous—has not produced conclusive results. The variables are numerous and hard to control. Research which reports favorable results for one method over the other usually is based on inadequate measures of achievement or is accompanied by inadequate controls of variables. It is generally concluded, however, that it is never possible by any method of

grouping to have a completely homogeneous group of pupils even for a single activity. By grouping, the range of abilities can be narrowed. Research indicates that grouping for one activity will reduce heterogeneity in another activity only about 20 percent(2). To be effective grouping must be for a special purpose.

Children will fall into clusters in their needs for instruction in certain skills in arithmetic; they will fall into other clusters for art. Indeed, some children vary so far from the norms that they seem seldom to be like other children in their instructional needs, yet each child has a need to associate with others of his own age. A balance is needed between grouping for special activities and provision for association with others at many ability levels.

Flexible grouping can probably be best achieved for young children, those in kindergarten through grade six, in the self-contained classroom. Special opportunities in the talent fields or for remedial work may be provided outside the regular classroom on a part-time basis by special teachers.

Teaching is particularly adaptable to flexible grouping and individualized instruction when a major portion of the pupil's learning experiences is organized around certain large themes or problems. Such an approach promotes use of a variety of materials, work in small groups, individual work, and total class projects with integration of a variety of subjects and activities. At the upper elementary level, such an approach is particularly adaptable in social studies, language arts, health, and science. Differentiated experiences may then be provided in mathematics, science, and interest fields of art, music, industrial arts, and homemaking. Less formal school activities such as the school paper, clubs

and games will provide many opportunities for pupils with special interests and abilities.

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Small High School

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Forty-eight of the 49 large high schools claimed to have in operation a guidance program whereas 34 of the 54 small schools claimed such a program. However, when a guidance program was defined as requiring that at least one staff member be assigned at least one period *per week* to work on the program, 36 large high schools and 10 small high schools met the test. When a guidance program was defined as requiring that at least one staff member be assigned at least one period *per day* to the program and recognizing that the staff member has no formal training in guidance, 19 large high schools and five small high schools could claim the existence of a

program. When a guidance program was defined as requiring the assignment of at least one period per day of a staff member who possessed some formal training in guidance, 17 large high schools and five small high schools could report such a program.

It is obvious that the large high schools could not claim a monopoly on guidance programs. Nevertheless, a distinct advantage seemed to lie with the large high school in attempts to give the guidance process some structure through a guidance program.

In summary, it is obvious that no profile can be constructed to fit all large high schools or all small high schools. However, after studying every Ohio high school listing 500-700 pupils in grades 9-12 and comparing certain educational aspects of those districts with an approximately equal number of systematically selected districts with grades 9-12 enrollments of less than 200, certain distinctions tend to appear.

In small high schools, according to the study, teachers receive lower salaries, have fewer years of experience and are less likely to hold graduate degrees when compared to their fellow staff members who serve large high schools.

Taxable wealth per pupil tends to be a little less in districts with small high schools when compared with districts containing large high schools. If the school tax rate for operation is an index of a community's educational effort the district of the small high school appears to make a little less effort than the district which includes a larger high school unit.

Finally, in at least one area of program, namely guidance, the small high school has more difficulty freeing staff for guidance activities and is less likely to attract a qualified guidance person.

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