

A key question about innovations:

More Opportunity for Learning — or Less?

A GOOD many innovations today are being promoted on the grounds that they make better provisions for individualized instruction. Such claims cause us to listen. Greater freedom for the learner is something to which we are deeply committed; it is something about which we may well need to be, and indeed are, newly concerned.

Any such proposal, then, should receive a fair hearing. It should also be studied closely for what is meant by individualized instruction. To do this, we need to be sure of what we mean by that term. Otherwise, we may reject an idea of merit, perhaps out of distaste for its present context. Or we may waste time on the further exploration of long since abandoned byways.

Although we may try to sharpen our definition of individualized instruction in various ways, basically we must relate any proposal toward that end to our conception of what a good program looks like. Our understanding of the many dimensions of human variability, our insights into the variety of purposes for and paths to learning, our appreciation of the value of multiple resources for

learning—all are so interwoven in our idea of a good program that we may find it hard to define individualized instruction apart from this total context.

Perhaps we can agree that characteristic of any provision seriously proposed as promising greater success in personalizing learning should be its orientation toward opening up the fullest possible range and richness of learning for all individuals. Among our current curriculum concerns, probably the one of greatest urgency is just this—that we may have imposed limitations or boundaries on some or on many or perhaps on most learners. Standardized content, closely graded textual materials, group-based measures of achievement, and some of our routine grouping procedures are being reexamined in light of new convictions that we can safely make more room for everybody's learning.

Individualizing Learning

Against this background of concern, we respond immediately to the promise of several current proposals for greater individualization of instruction. For ex-

ample, the movement to individualize the teaching of reading properly excites us. The approach uses what we know about pace. It redeems interest and purpose as central to reading. It also promises to emancipate both learner and teacher from too great dependence on too few materials; it centers on the full use of resources that have often been perceived as "outside" or supplementary to instruction. All this we accept as moving in the direction of making more room for learning.

Of similar promise are the attempts now being made to transcend the limitations we recognize as coming from too closely graded instruction, as in mathematics. Confining children to the mastery of a handful of number facts parceled out in terms of a supposed logic of less to more difficult is being challenged on several counts. Helping children learn to think in terms of relationships and interrelationships is tied to a new concern for learning by wholes. Here, again, the conception of learning really promises to make more room for children to learn whatever they can that will help make increasing sense out of their world.

The attention now being given to new approaches to independent study, particularly at the secondary level, may also seem worth pursuing. We need not accept the total context of some of these ventures. Independent study does not have to be carried on in dark corners nor paid for by mass teaching. We have long valued the provision of opportunities for learners to go it on their own, to learn more than everybody has to know, to find out much that only they want or need to or perhaps can learn. The new emphasis on independent study may cause us to think through again better ways of making sure that personal learning is both valued and supported.

Still another recent development of promise is the seminar. At its best, the seminar provides a setting in which advanced students are freed to investigate problems and topics in terms of individual interests or purposes, with the emphasis on research and experimentation. The general approach, while found most widely at the eleventh and twelfth grades, also characterizes some special provisions for gifted children, usually those offered in late afternoon, Saturday, or summer classes. Hopefully, our assessment of the seminar may enliven our efforts to incorporate more of what we believe about the role of interest, of purpose, and of personal discovery in our program at all levels for all learners.

These innovations, then, may well seem to us to hold promise of promoting greater individualization of instruction. Of course, there are still questions about them we may wish to ask. We need to know that emancipation from the textbook in learning to read is accompanied by continued attention to skill development. We are concerned about what happens to children's immediate needs and experiences in a kind of learning that newly stresses generalizations and structure. We would like to see the independent study movement clarify its thinking on the function of the group in learning and the seminar idea rescued from its tie-in with abler learners only.

In general, however, these developments seem to give real promise of lifting the limitations that may sometimes close in on the learner as an individual. Through the wider use of resources, a new vision of how to escape from the ceilings in graded learning, a new em-

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phasis on depth studies, and a reemphasis on learning through experimentation, research and personal discovery, we sense in these proposals the desire to perfect a conception of learning and teaching that promises more opportunity for everybody.

Less Opportunity for Learning?

But there is currently another group of proposals for individualizing instruction about which we may be less hopeful. In fact, if we are to clarify what we mean when we talk about better provisions for personal learning, we are going to need to think through very carefully the differences between this second set and those already discussed. As we do, we may find the basic differences come in the narrowness of the program conceived of by these proposals and their reduction of individual variability to one dimension only: rate of learning.

Let us look at some of these proposals briefly. One of them is the team learning idea. In this practice, as most widely described, learners are put together in pairs or trios with the purpose of helping each other move more successfully through the given material to be learned.

We may see in this kind of learning situation something to admire,⁴ much, indeed, that we have long sought to provide for in good programs. We know children have a great deal to learn from each other and much to learn that can only be learned together. What is questionable about this method is the conception of what is to be learned. The program envisioned in team learning seems to be a preplanned, prescribed sequence of learnings through which all learners must proceed. Pairing and trio-ing the learners is a device for helping speed them through.

Another rate-centered approach to individualized instruction is found in a variety of attempts to solve the problem of personal learning through regrouping. The Joplin Plan, some variants of the ungraded primary, and some of the team teaching experiments belong to this camp. Again, the program is conceived of as fixed, and children are reshuffled to put them in touch with that segment of it which marks the place in time which they have reached in their contact with the program.

A third new attempt to speed learners through a narrowed sequence of learnings is found in the varied ways being developed to "program" what is to be learned more thoroughly than we have ever been able to, or perhaps cared to, in the past. Whether tied to machines of some kind or not, these efforts all presuppose an identical program for every learner. Again, the only difference among individuals that really matters is how quickly they can move through this program.

What disturbs us in these ventures, then, should rightly disturb us. At what cost do they propose to provide more adequately for individualized instruction? The program is reduced; the individual is diminished.

Contrasts in Approaches

The difference between such narrowed-down, rate-centered proposals and those that most of us see as really promising to enlarge learning for the individual can be highlighted by spelling out how they vary in a few of the usual ways of looking at curriculum and teaching.

Content

A rate-centered approach conceives of content as preselected and preorganized,

the same for all learners. Ideally, it is presentable in highly graded fashion so that everybody can move through it step by step. Emphasis is on information—facts, definitions, fixed relationships, single and “right” answers.

An approach that emphasizes opportunities for the learner conceives of content as created by him. While some learnings will be created in common, many will be unique to the individual. All of what he learns becomes his own, in any context of understanding, but some things only he will be able to OR need to OR want to learn.

Method

In rate-centered learning, with an emphasis on acceptance and retention of content specified in textual material, method is concerned with facilitating the movement through what is to be learned as expeditiously as possible. Opportunities for enlarging on basic understandings tend to be provided terminally and thus go chiefly to the faster learners.

Emphasis on created content involves a method through which learners help in planning experiences and selecting materials for learning. Provision for individual needs gets incorporated in the program from the beginning, being perceived as essential to effective learning for everybody.

Resources

Obviously, under an approach that emphasizes rate, the resources tend to be limited to the textual material.

On the other hand, an emphasis on room for learning will be accompanied by a desire to make use of the full range of resources for learning—textbooks and many other kinds of printed materials, films, recordings, television as appro-

priate, human resources, study trips, and all the rest.

In brief, under a rate-centered approach to learning, content is seen as fixed, the teacher is seen mainly as an expeditor, and resources dwindle to a single text. In the kind of program most of us are supporting, content is seen as created by learners to satisfy many needs and interests (and to stimulate new ones), the teacher as filling many roles, and the resources for learning as virtually boundless.

Lines of Action

The key question, then, is whether proposed innovations for more effective individualization of instruction actually do provide more opportunity for learning. In order to make our judgments on this score more discriminating, as we have pointed out, we have to become increasingly clear about our own conception of learning and teaching. As we do, there are several lines of action open to us for making our clarification count in actual practice.

One is to test proposed innovations on our own terms. So often we see the innovation embedded in its original context and feel that since we cannot accept the context, we would prefer not to deal with the essential idea, medium or technique. Yet we cannot expect the lay technicians and promoters from whom some of these new notions come to bring to their testing much scope of educational insight. Putting new techniques and devices to the ultimate test is our business and must be done within a framework as broad as our best thinking. Programmed learning will no doubt have its uses when we can separate it from some of its present zealous proponents as will educational television and a host of other newer developments.

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Another line of action is to become more articulately critical among ourselves about the possibilities and the limitations of the new. Most educational literature is nonevaluative. We have many exhortations to do this or that. We have many descriptions of what is going on. We have a great many reports that claim success, usually in a mood of self-congratulation supported with the results of simple attempts at proof. Yet we seldom have accounts of efforts to face up to the issues involved, to sharpen differences in conceptions of learning, to chal-

lenge the breadth of concern for human development. Perhaps part of this hesitation comes from the fact that most of us work for public schools and our first audience is the local constituency which has no ear for doubts and misgivings or reports of failure. We may hesitate, too, to attack colleagues placed like ourselves on public view.

Yet whenever two or three of us are together these days, we can privately assay many dubious proposals with a high degree of discrimination. We soon come to very close agreements about the need to watch with a sharp eye some of the widely publicized innovations. Some of us, if the doors are closed, are even willing to speak very frankly of the doubts we may have about some practices that we may have been "promoted into" by lay or semi-professional zealots. Unless we do come out of the back room with our best thinking, we are certainly behaving at less than the professional level. In our educational literature, we need more than carbon copies of the publicity releases fed to local newspapers.

Finally, we ought ourselves to be spending more effort in becoming increasingly inventive in finding better ways to realize our own conception of what it takes to provide the best possible program for boys and girls. Leadership has gone to lay groups, semiprofessional agencies, and foundations. This results in part because we have not ourselves moved out as boldly as we could to imagine and test the conditions that would enable us to find more opportunity for learning rather than less, to bring to every child more of the richness and range of learning, to help every individual to become all that he could become in ways personally satisfying to him and socially enriching to us all.

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