

The Importance of People

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Individual Differences and School Practice

IN the United States today, every practicing teacher is acutely aware of the manifold ways in which his pupils differ. Moreover, in his preparation to enter the teaching profession, he has been duly informed about the nature of these differences and has undoubtedly been admonished about the importance of taking these into account in his teaching. However, it is my contention, overstated, of course, for the sake of argument, that rarely has the teacher been encouraged to regard uniqueness as an asset, as a characteristic to be encouraged, as something to be nurtured and built upon. Rather, the implicit, if not explicit, philosophy of the public school system, to which our teacher preparation institutions subscribe, is to regard uniqueness largely as a necessary evil, as a major tribulation with which each teacher must contend.

To help the teacher cope with the burden of uniqueness, the "enlightened" school system attempts to reduce the range of uniqueness by smaller classes selected according to increasingly refined procedures for homogeneous grouping. By so doing the system hopes that the teacher will be better able to teach a uniform curriculum in a uniform way with uniform goals for all.

We have gone a long way from the days of the one room schoolhouse. Then the teacher, with little more than a high school education, was forced to develop techniques that would provide a varied curriculum for pupils of all ages, sizes, abilities and personalities. He had no alternative but to have different members of the class doing a variety of different things at one and the same time. Children were allowed to progress at their own pace in terms of their own interests and capabilities. Certainly the education that each child received was not the best of all possible educations. I wonder, though, whether the changes we have instituted for the improvement of education are the best of all possible changes.

Rather than find ways to help the teacher improve his techniques for dealing with diversity, we have concentrated our energies and financial resources on reducing diversity. We have increasingly refined our homogeneous grouping procedures, while at the same time we have demanded more uniformities in curriculum, more standardized procedures for teaching, more standardized tests for evaluating outcomes of teaching, and obedience to an increasing number of rules and regulations to make conformity more compelling.

Mass Product

Our educational system has been caught in the mass production philosophy of our industrial age. We have been trying to treat children as if they were different models of cars. Each model has its own production line, and the teacher-worker is taught standardized procedures and given standardized materials designed for the model to which he is assigned. But the purpose of the different production lines is not to increase the diversity of the models, but rather to make it easier for the teacher to remold the model to fit the uniform package which is education's or society's ultimate goal.

The "slow learner" is put in a group with other "slow learners" so that the teacher can use a standardized procedure that he has learned in a special methods course, and standardized materials, spe-

cially developed for this production line, with the hope that, in the end, the pupil will emerge looking as much like everyone else as possible. The "fast learner," on the other hand, at least until recently, has not been thought to need a special production line. To achieve the ultimate uniform model was no problem for him; and since no other model was to be encouraged, the teacher's problem was to keep the fast learner occupied by giving him more of the same kind of tasks or to utilize him to do school chores that in no way represented a challenge to his unique capabilities. Today, primarily because our national concern for world leadership overshadows our internal desires for uniformity, we are rapidly developing separate production lines for the "fast learner" along with the appropriate methods courses to teach the teacher the specialized skills required. Two skills seem of paramount importance: first, that

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the pupil not know the real reasons for being put in a special production line, for it would be undemocratic to tell him of his unique strengths and weaknesses so that he might develop realistic and challenging goals; and second, that he not cover any material or acquire any skills that are taught at a higher grade level.

I continue to be amazed by the fact that many so-called "enrichment" programs involve activities and experiences that would be more meaningful and significant to the "slow learner" and more beneficial to his ultimate welfare than they are to the intellectually gifted learner whose unique abilities to handle abstract symbols may remain unchallenged. For instance, in one school a child who loved music was prevented from joining an enrichment program in music because her arithmetic scores fell below the medium for her grade, whereas all those children who were in the upper ten per-

cent of the group in arithmetic were required to participate in the music program even though some of them would have preferred to have learned more about mathematics.

Uniqueness

In spite of special production lines for the "slow" and "fast" learners, the teacher in the standard model production line is still confronted by problems of uniqueness. For the school system not only requires that everybody pass through a uniform curriculum but also that the pupils conduct themselves in such a manner as to make it easy for the teacher to use uniform methods to get instruction across. Thus the "good" child is *not* one who is resourceful, explorative, able to act freely on the basis of his own ideas, experimentally minded and spontaneous in his behavior; but rather—to judge by

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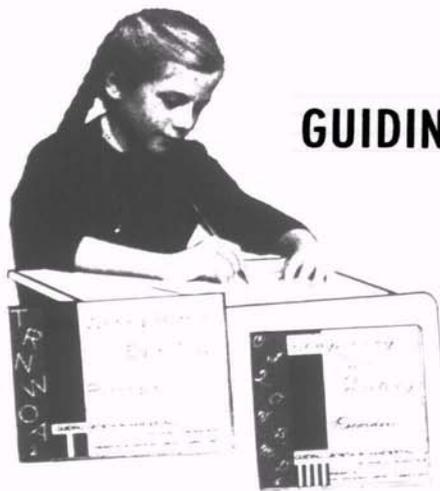
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The demands for behavioral conformity are even supported by state legal codes that make it a crime not to “submit to the authority of the teacher and the school.”¹ The implications of such codes are obvious. According to them, a pupil is held responsible for his personality, in spite of a wealth of psychological evidence to the contrary.

The behavioral deviant acts the way he does because of forces over which he has no control. Usually he perceives the situation as threatening and can do nothing but defend himself against the threat. Since punishment, whether physical or psychological, increases the threat and therefore the defenses, it is worse than

¹ California State Education Code, Sec. 10851.

ineffectual. To change the manifested behavior, the psychological situation must be changed. A few “enlightened” schools are beginning to respond to the accumulated evidence concerning the dynamics of personality by using the timeworn procedure of instituting another production line. Social adjustment classes are cropping up to handle the nonconformist, an individual who may well be the resultant of the school’s own demands for uniformity.

To cite but one example of how demands for uniformity create massive problems in individual differences, I was recently told by a member of the central attendance office of a large school district that, if classes in physical education at the junior and senior high school were made optional, there would be a 50 percent reduction in the attendance problems of the district. In these classes there are more than the usual demands for con-

forming behavior. Pupils must not only learn the same skills at the same time—skills as meaningless to the present life and future activities of the average pupil as soccer, basketball and baseball—but they must undress and shower in public and put on the same uniform. If physical education is so important that in California, at least, it is required more consistently than is English, the requirements ought to be sufficiently flexible to permit a particular individual's deep-seated feelings about exhibiting his body or his physical ineptness to the public gaze to be respected. Surely a choice of activities with a choice of costume is not beyond the limits of teachers' capabilities or of educational budgets to provide.

Diversity

The principle of diversity of activity within a class need apply not only to physical education. It is equally meaningful and probably equally feasible in any subject matter area and at any grade level. But to put the principle into practice will require changes in our administrative procedures and changes in the role traditionally expected of teachers. Red tape and rigid rules and regulations both for teachers and pupils will have to be reduced to a minimum. Standardized textbooks will need to be replaced by a wide range of learning materials. In the old days, there was such a shortage of published materials that uniform textbooks were a necessity. Today, although there is a tremendous diversity of printed material, the teacher is frequently not allowed to take advantage of it. If he could, he might see the possibility of allowing individual differences to flourish in the classroom.

He might be allowed to discover that a teacher does not have to stand in front

of a classroom and give out uniform content according to a standardized plan. In a history class, he might allow a girl very much interested in clothes to study change through explorations of fashions, or a boy very much interested in science to study change through significant contributions to technology, still another to study political conflict, while someone with a practical bent could make models showing changes in living conditions, and so on. Since each pupil would be working individually or with a few others, the teacher would be free to offer assistance when needed and to encourage each pupil to develop his potentialities to the utmost. Each child could develop self-respect because he would be making a unique contribution to the whole. He would not have to suffer affronts to his ego from continual comparison with his age-mates. I do not think I am being too idealistic or unrealistic, for I have seen a



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first grade teacher "teach" reading to a class of 50 children by encouraging the pupils to teach each other. While they learned at various rates, the teacher was free to help those with special needs or problems or even to talk to visitors.

With the flexible program I envisage, there would be no need for special classes for "exceptional" children. Within the walls of a single room, each pupil would be encouraged to think for himself and to do for himself, to be creative, to observe accurately, to test new ideas and

to develop judgment based upon his own experience. He would learn how to have freedom and how to use it constructively to grow and develop optimally, and also how, within this freedom, to listen and to learn from others. He would learn how to live with and extend his own uniqueness; and at the same time live with and grow through the uniqueness of others.

—NORA WECKLER, *Associate Professor of Psychology, and Chairman of the Department, San Fernando Valley State College, Northridge, California.*

Teaching Machines

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stimulus patterns. Discrimination is developed by rewarding only the correct response.

What impact can we expect the use of teaching machines and auto-instructional programs to have on education during the next ten years? One answer has been given by the writer and Robert Glaser in the concluding chapter of our recent book, *Teaching Machines and Programmed Learning*.² Our conclusions were as follows:

Teaching machines and programmed learning can have a major impact on education. Their use can effectively and dependably guide the student's learning-by-doing as he proceeds, as rapidly as his abilities permit, through carefully pretested instructional programs. It can thus be made economically feasible to provide every student with many of the benefits of a skilled private tutor, since auto-instructional materials can anticipate and be responsive to his needs for mastering each aspect of a subject matter. Not only do programmed materials

themselves thus have the potential for producing much more efficient learning than has hitherto been generally possible, but their wise use should make possible the much more constructive use of the teacher's talents.

The basis for consistent improvement in educational methods is a systematic translation of the techniques and findings of the experimental science of human learning into the practical development of an instructional technology. To achieve the full benefits inherent in this concept, instructional materials and practices must be designed with careful attention to the attainment of explicitly stated, behaviorally defined educational goals. Programmed learning sequences must be developed through procedures that include systematic tryout and progressive revision based on analysis of student behavior.

The rate at which the methods of programmed learning may influence the practices, staff and facility requirements of school systems is difficult to predict. However, it seems likely that we can look forward to significant revisions in concepts of classroom practices and teacher functions. We also need to foresee and plan for the time when, because of increased instructional effectiveness, a much more advanced range of educational content can be included in the precollege curriculum.

² National Education Association, The Department of Audio-Visual Instruction. *Teaching Machines and Programmed Learning*. A. A. Lumsdaine and Robert Glaser, Editors. Washington D. C.: the Department, 1960. p. 572.

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