

## Evaluating Differentiation of Learning in Reading Instruction

A NOTICEABLE trend in the teaching of reading is the declining influence of the traditional basal reading programs. As a result, there is a veritable explosion of all types and varieties of materials moving into the deepening vacuum. Some of these phenomena exist as materials alone, while others insist that they are a full blown program.

The best of curriculum workers, through the years, have worked to fit teaching to the learning of each child. Differentiation of learning for a class of children, nevertheless, has, like the weather, had much said about it, and little done about it. The most notable push of practical classroom help in this direction began about 1952 and continues with a spate of writing and research around the practice called, however inadequately, "individualized reading." Hindsight shows a groundswell was in existence, as other curricular areas (for example, mathematics and science) responded in the direction of similar methodology for independent, individualistic education.

Differentiated learning is most easily

a fact when the learners are the ones that choose the material by which they are taught to read. This factor of pupil choice, sometimes called self-selection or free-choice, is crucial. The uniqueness of every human being has been substantiated too fundamentally to allow contrary argument. There is no sameness between individuals' personality development, their needs, their interests. We differ, and we have a right to differ. How does this apply to a reading program?

Sylvia Ashton-Warner<sup>1</sup> describes how she develops what she calls "key vocabulary" or what we would call "sight vocabulary." In this activity, each one of her five year olds is free to tell her any word that has a personal, dynamic attraction to him. It does not matter if the word is "ghost" or "house." Each child has his own words. Miss Warner teaches the necessary reading and writing skills with whatever words are said. She accepts these pupil offerings. There is clear, unmistakable free choice and, therefore, differentiated learning.

Were a teacher to use this "key vocabulary" of children to develop a permanent list intended for all children, it would be as Ashton-Warner said, a dead

<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Ashton-Warner. *Teacher*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963.

---

*Jeannette Veatch is Professor of Education, Jersey City State College, Jersey City, New Jersey.*

vocabulary. Words must come "bubbling hot" each day to each child, and be recorded for the use of that child only. To the degree that teachers allow true freedom of choice, to that degree do we meet our criteria of individual differences.

In the same vein, the "language-experience" approach, as notably described by Lee and Van Allen,<sup>2</sup> lends itself to gradations of differentiated teaching. Teachers take dictation from the class (or group or child) and record what is said on large paper or on the chalkboard. If teachers maintain the children's own expressions as carefully as possible, to that extent do children see their own language in written form.

Our guideline is that of pupil choice. When each child recognizes his own spoken language in writing, to that degree he has chosen the path to reading through his own unique ideas. The problem, of course, lies in the size of classes. Taking dictation from all children every day is a formidable task. Short cuts must be found, and grouping for dictation is common.

Yet there is another danger that must be mentioned. Many are mistakenly concerned that pupils will "miss something" unless they read the preprimers before they read the primer, and the primer before the first reader, etc., etc. Such teachers thus corrupt the process of pupil choice if they use pupil dictation to teach the sight vocabulary of the coming preprimers or primers. The intention is that all children will eventually be reading the same books. This is a clear denial of individual differences, even though the paths through many experience charts and stories could and do provide variety along the way.

To continue, there are many programs called "phonics" that need evaluating with our yardstick of pupil choice. Unfortunately, they largely fail to measure up. There are none that teach letter sounds with the use of children's own words or language to initiate understanding of phonics. One or two systems bring in children's own words after early initiation to reinforce phonic learnings. But all, without exception, as far as this writer has been able to ascertain, are based upon lists of words without regard for their origin in a given class's spoken or written language.

The current teaching of phonics, therefore, fails on this criterion, whatever its success on others.

Before passing on to another guideline, the matter of programmed materials, as far as pupil choice is concerned, must be mentioned. Whatever else may be said about programing, and there is a lot else, there is no doubt that the pupil has a great deal of choice in what he will read.

He may choose to skip around. He may choose to "cheat" on answering the questions that are supposed to test what he has learned from the material. But whether or not he follows the program as he is supposed to, the right of choice is a feature of programmed materials. To that extent, programing is differentiated in character.

One of the best known programs built almost entirely upon the principle of self-choice is Montessori. While there are serious deficiencies in its prereading activities, the freedom with which children choose those activities available is to be commended on this basis.

The best known practice of this concept of free choice, or self-selection, came to prominence with Willard Olson's now famous article called, "Seeking,

<sup>2</sup> Dorris M. Lee and R. Van Allen. *Learning To Read Through Experience*. New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1963.

Self-Selection and Pacing.”<sup>3</sup> In this reading program, each child chooses a book or piece of material with which he is taught to read. Each child has his own book. At frequent intervals he brings a book of his choice to the teacher for an individual conference during which matters of individual needs are recognized. These are dealt with on the spot, or handled in a group situation with those other pupils having the same difficulties.

In such an approach as this, heterogeneous grouping comes into its own. In a fourth grade, for example, with an adequate book supply, children reading from first grade levels to eighth grade levels can be handled without crucifying the slow or holding back the able. The differences that exist and that are noticed are not hurtful to anyone.

### Independent Writing

Pupil choice or self-selection comes into its own when independent writing is part of the reading instruction program. If the writing is *not* independent and is the result of assignment in a workbook, or upon a specified teacher-thought-up theme or topic, then individual differences are less well met. The criteria of pupil choice is a major one when looking at an approach that encourages, *as part of the reading program*, the writing of independently developed ideas.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner's work, the language experience approach, and to some degree activities found in the *i/t/a Manual*<sup>4</sup> are along these lines. The reliability of the symbol-sound relationship in the last approach is demonstrably

<sup>3</sup> Willard Olson. "Seeking, Self-Selection and Pacing." *The Packet*. Vol. 7, No. 1; Spring 1952.

<sup>4</sup> A. J. Mazurkiewicz and H. J. Tanyzer. *Teacher's Manual and Key. Book I, Ready for Reading*. New York: i/t/a Publications.

pushing the use of writing in connection with reading. Similarly, Durrell<sup>5</sup> recognized the importance of writing when he stated that "word analysis is best done . . . in the spelling period."

The use of independent writing to teach reading is an excellent benchmark in assaying whether or not a reading program allows for differentiated learning.

### Pacing or Rate of Reading

The capacity of reading approaches to differentiate learning must, among others, be judged on the criteria of pacing or rate of reading. This is not meant as the actual speed of reading, although this is related. Rate, or pacing, refers to the amount to be read at a given daily sitting. One page a day? One story a day? As far as a pupil may go? All read the same? All read at their own pace or rate?

In the traditional basal systems the amount of reading is governed by the manuals. Children are not asked to read ahead on the theory that they will miss some aspect of skill development, supposedly, and without any research proof, imbedded in a given piece of material. Because of this discouragement of self-pacing, there can be little differentiation of teaching. All must follow the preset, predeveloped lesson. Yet basal authors insist that individual differences are met through the device of ability grouping, or of recreational reading.

The most extreme example of ability, or homogeneous grouping, is that called the Joplin Plan. Inherently this plan puts children together on similarities rather than differences. The plan, in effect, makes it difficult for a teacher to differentiate the learning. With a room full of pupils at the allegedly same level of

<sup>5</sup> D. D. Durrell. *Improving Reading Instruction*. New York: World Book, 1956. p. 267.

ability, the teacher teaches in the same way, from the same books and other materials.

That there is yet no well-designed research that proves the effectiveness of such an approach is probably no accident. This approach certainly does not make individualization easy.

In general, whether or not a reading approach meets individual differences well, depends upon the way it suggests the grouping of pupils. Grouping on test results is grouping upon generalized bases.<sup>6</sup> Grouping is more suited to individual needs when it is accomplished on more specific, task oriented, day-to-day, this-is-what-I-don't-know bases.

### Personal Identification

Reading instruction cannot meet individual differences if it ignores the personality characteristics of the pupils involved. Imbedded in any proper approach to teaching reading must be some practice that *uses* the personal experiences, interests, needs, fears, concerns of the learner.

The practices that come off best in this aspect of evaluation are those programs that start with children's own language for instruction. The language-experience approach has already been mentioned.

Similarly, any approach that allows self-choice and self-pacing must, inherently, be based upon the bibliotherapeutic criterion of personal identification. Children choose the books that they *like*. Personal identification differentiates what is read.

<sup>6</sup> See the writer's article, "Grouping Is the Function and Process of Content," *Educational Leadership* 18: 425-28, April 1961.

Also Carleton W. Washburne, "Adjusting the Program to the Child," *Educational Leadership* 11: 138; December 1963.

Classroom practices that enable a teacher to teach pupils on an individual basis are the best practices for meeting individual differences. There is simply no substitute for an individual conference. Even teachers who are shaky as to how to proceed in a one-to-one or a one-to-two conference, fall into a helpful line as they talk with each child. This is not usually the problem. Rather the problem is the rest of the class.

It is notable that there is no program of reading instruction aside from that called "individualized reading" that encourages and plans for a teacher-pupil individual conference.

The art of good conferencing is largely dependent upon an effective independent work period.<sup>7</sup> When a class is busy at constructive and absorbing tasks, a teacher is freed to pursue individual and group teaching.

Some materials, notably the *SRA Individualized Reading*, are set up in such a way as to encourage such a conference. But this, and other programs like it, are more appropriately described as programmed materials. The degree of differentiation depends upon the material to be covered, not upon the teacher's analysis of what needs to be learned.

In summary, then, reading programs that meet the criteria of differentiating teaching and learning stand or fall upon the guidelines of: pupil choice of material, independent writing, pacing or rate of reading, personal identification, and individual conferences.

Reading instruction can be evaluated upon other criteria, but these are submitted as crucial if the evaluation is to be that of meeting individual differences.

<sup>7</sup> One of the best references for teachers for "seatwork" is: Darrow and Allen. *Independent Activities for Creative Learning*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1961.

Copyright © 1965 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.