

New Goals for Individualization

RONALD STODGHILL

WE HAVE often heard that the strength of this nation is founded on its diversity—its recognition and acceptance of the uniqueness of various cultures and *individuals*. This philosophical and moral principle is very seldom contested. However, in practice, educators have all too often ignored or violated this principle.

For example, most educators are convinced that individuals learn at different rates. Nevertheless, school systems continue to seat 30-35 learners in straight rows, require that the pupils turn to the same page of a textbook, and articulate a single formula for moving from chapter X to chapter Y.

This common practice is understandable, and perhaps at one time served a useful function in educating for literacy and for meeting the minimal educational demands of an increasingly specialized labor force. "Educating the masses" became the phrase of that early period. Unfortunately, this phrase is now often used by educators to dodge the real mandate for educating the individual. I am reminded of an experience a few years ago when I was bowling with a professional of some note. After three frustrating games, he informed me, "The reason you are losing so badly is that you are bowling a game at a time, and I am bowling a frame at a time."

A Place for Others

The analogy seems to be unusually appropriate. For "the masses" are comprised of individuals, and until we understand and concentrate our efforts on the individual, "educating the masses" is a meaningless phrase. We must, however, recognize that educators have this collectivistic orientation, and this orientation is clearly contradictory to what we know about the learning process. Further, and just as important, such a mass orientation is antithetical to the moral purpose of schooling. Such a practice breeds unnecessary competition and produces as many failures as successes. This is partly evidenced by the fact that many minority students are beginning to view the formal educational establishment as a place, not for themselves, but for *others*.

So as we discuss "new goals for individualization," we must realize that at least two levels are involved. The first level clearly focuses on the individual and his or her unique learning style, marshaling all the knowledge and resources available in order that the individual may fulfill his or her potential. Even here, however, we must recognize that interaction with peers and teachers is an integral component of self-development. Individualization thus becomes

more than study carrels, headphones, and programmed textbooks. It acknowledges that wholesome growth is dependent, in large measure, upon the kinds of relationships the learner has with others. Consequently, small and large group discussions, lectures, and social activities are important because they provide the individual with opportunities for exchanging ideas, and for involvement with others. It is essential that the quality and the climate surrounding the experiences be such that they serve as catalysts for positive and meaningful growth.

The second level, though more subtle, is equally important. It speaks to our commitment as educators to go beyond the relatively narrow view we have long held—the classroom as sanctuary. We must begin to re-examine our roles. We must see 30 distinct

pupils, not waiting to be molded into some corporate whole, but crying out for self-definition and fulfillment. In short, we must begin to view ourselves as functionaries in a system which must begin to live up to its preachments of decades ago.

As John Childs stated, "All deliberate education is a moral undertaking." That morality, it seems to me, is acted out when we deal with individualized instruction not only as a sound educational strategy, but also as a process by which this nation begins to feel the joy and strength implicit in its moral commitment to respect and honor the uniqueness of the individual.

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