

# Editorial

## *Individualization—the Unfulfilled Goal*

Robert H. Anderson

Although the term has long been with us and most ASCD'ers have spent virtually their entire careers seeking to foster it, individualized instruction remains, on the American educational scene, a largely unfulfilled goal. Some even regard the idea as controversial, and many express doubts as to whether we know enough, or care enough, actually to bring it about. It is therefore both timely and appropriate for *Educational Leadership* to take "another look" at the topic in this February issue.

It is now 52 years since the National Society for the Study of Education (NSSE) issued its yearbook (1925) entitled *Adapting the Schools to Individual Differences*, under the editorship of Carleton Washburne; and it is 15 years since there appeared the more recent NSSE yearbook (1962) entitled *Individualizing Instruction*. The work and literature on which these two scholarly volumes drew go back well over 100 years; and except that both volumes seem, if anything, to understate the extent of variation among learners, they could serve appropriately as guides to current study and policy making. I mention this not to downgrade more recent writings or to imply that the old "duffers" had sufficient answers, but rather to scold a bit about the sluggish pace of both scholarship and action on this all-important front.

### Emphasis on "Individualized Learning"?

I would have been a jot happier if this issue's theme were worded "individualized learning," since there has been a subtle but important shift over recent years away from discussions that focus upon the teacher's behaviors and the delivery system being employed, and toward comment on *learning* as the phenomenon we seek primarily to influence. All the things that distinguish each child from every other child with whom she/he will ever associate—and each year brings insights into yet other ways of recognizing

all the possible differences—combine to make her/him an absolutely unique learner.

Whatever is said about our efforts to *teach* must ultimately be construed in terms of the effects those efforts might have upon this type of learning or that. No specific system or approach ever invented can possibly be advocated for all types of learners, although eclectic systems that combine numerous, diverse approaches seem likelier to succeed than systems of limited variety. The terrible price we have paid for our overlong addiction to certain one-dimensional formats, especially whole-class instruction within a graded framework, is only recently coming to be widely understood. Still wider understanding is needed, however, and it needs to be matched by a readiness to act.

### Our Focus Is Too Narrow

My guess is that the action will itself be of many sorts and descriptions; and this is good. Too often, our discussions of individualization have been narrowly focused on one, two, or at most three examples. Some of these examples, to be sure, are excellent, and at least three major systems of individualized instruction on the current scene have contributed significantly to our awareness of what is possible. They are Individually Guided Education (IGE), Adaptive Environments for Learning (extending Individually Prescribed Instruction, or IPI), and Program for Learning in Accordance with Needs (PLAN). NSSE's 1975 publication<sup>1</sup> on these three systems helps both to provide useful descriptions and to raise useful questions about efficacy, about practicality, and even about certain political and moral dilemmas that surround our efforts to serve individuals while also serving society.

Individually appropriate, technically effective

<sup>1</sup> Harriet Talmage, editor. *Systems of Individualized Education*. Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1975.

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tive, and economical learning experiences cannot easily be designed for every child at each stage of his or her educational development. Moreover, some of what we have long been accustomed to doing as teachers seems to "work," at least for some of the students, and over the years we have developed and accepted certain expectations or norms that comfort us when we achieve them. The tragedy is that we spend too little time in hard-headed analysis of what is really happening to students and in discussion of some of the newer options we might well be considering. There is embarrassing evidence that this problem is compounded because we in education do not read widely enough; we also take in-service meetings and other professional activities too casually, and we generally shy away from risk taking.

As a result, many schools have virtually no serious efforts under way to develop individualized instruction via such promising vehicles as open education, differentiated staffing and teaming, different forms of pupil grouping, peer tutoring, variants of Personalized System of Instruction (Keller Plan), open-space architectural arrangements, IGE, and almost infinite varieties of technology-based instruction. In too few schools, in fact, do faculty members indulge in observing and critiquing each other even within the various more familiar formats, especially small-group work and the adviser-advisee situation, that are especially valued for their individual focus and their presumed contributions to individual pupil growth. The resultant dearth of knowledge about how colleagues interact with students in such contexts hampers the development in many teachers of a more versatile professional repertoire. We stick to what we think "works."

## Resistance to Change

I am troubled by the seemingly growing tendency of some segments of the general public to accept or even prefer conventional, non-individualized instruction in local schools, this usually on grounds not only of economy but also of protecting some of the basic values and tradi-

tions of the society. Uneasiness about how well children are learning the basic skills in today's schools may have some justification; but in my own view the problem is not that we have recklessly abandoned an effective traditional system, but rather that we have stuck with it far too long and at a terrible human cost. How, given what we know and value as a nation, can we possibly remain loyal to arrangements that ignore (or at least play down) the actual heterogeneity of children, that pit children against each other in unrealistic competition, that standardize and restrict both the range and depth of the curriculum, that invest teachers rather than their students with virtually all authority to select learning experiences, and that develop mostly a compliant type of discipline? What research is there that justifies whole-class instruction as a steady diet, or that shows how emotional, social, and interpersonal needs are better met in the literally-graded, conventionally-structured classroom?

Thanks to organizations like ASCD, the irritation reflected in such questions is shared by many thousands and the resolve of most educational leaders is to pursue the path toward individualization. Thanks also to these organizations, our resolve is bolstered by the attention that is paid in professional meetings and in publications to this all-important topic. In the pages that follow, is an update on some of the purposes, the accomplishments, the problems, the theoretical underpinnings, and the prospects of individualized instruction. The message should bolster not only our resolve, but our optimism concerning the possible. [E]



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