

The Group Centered Classroom: Alternative to Individualized Instruction?

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These writers present a case against individualization of instruction based mainly in terms of logistics, financial unfeasibility, and social undesirability. They also give nine reasons in support of the group-centered classroom.

Individualized instruction is neither desirable nor possible. As a "sure cure" for every educational ill, from the teacher surplus to declining reading levels, individualization has become the snake oil of educational medicine men. While correctly damning the teacher-centered and competitive classroom, the purveyors of the "wonder solution" would have us believe that individualization is the only alternative. Just as the alcohol content of the medicine wagon's product seemed to bring relief to those who "stepped right up," attempts at individualization bring about an outpouring of effort and materials which produces a glow on education's cheek but may

cause more problems than it cures. The alternative we propose, because it is both desirable and possible, is the group-centered classroom.

Individualized education refers to any of the procedures used to ensure that the individual student receives instruction that is specifically appropriate to that student. A general definition is that individualized instruction consists of planning and conducting with each student, general programs of study and day-to-day lessons that are tailor made to suit the student's learning needs and specific characteristics as a learner.

We believe individualized instruction is an undesirable structure for learning because it neglects the social development of the student. In this type of setting there is little opportunity for student interaction and meaningful student interchange. Because everyone is working at an individual rate, on individual goals, there will be little chance to learn and use interpersonal and group skills. Student friendships and support systems will be minimized. All of the affective

outcomes resulting from planned interaction among students will be lost.

Highly individualized learning structures may promote student loneliness, alienation, and boredom. An example of this phenomenon: programmed learning materials and individual packets are one of the major resources of teachers who claim to individualize. There are several undesirable side effects accompanying their use. These "individualized" materials steal time from students who could be working together to set and reach new learning goals, working with teachers, or exploring learning centers in the library. As students begin to realize that the teacher has an unlimited supply of "individual" work that they can never finish, they develop undesirable work habits and become easily distracted. In severe cases of boredom, rebellion expressed by vandalism, violence, and truancy can occur. The individualized process of learning may increase students' dislike of school and create student dissatisfaction with the learning process. At best, the entire process becomes ritualized into something we could call "mechanical work sheets."

What Are the Drawbacks?

The danger is that highly individualized instruction would lead to selfishness and self-centeredness. One need only listen carefully to students describe how an individualized program met their needs to discern an arrogant underlying message such as "It's a good thing the system gave in to me, man." Children can become so overly concerned with the system serving them that teachers may find themselves meeting greedy manipulative "wants" instead of true educational and social needs.

Further, individualized structure is not possible from an organizational, financial, or technical viewpoint.

Since most schools are still organized with a student/teacher ratio of 25 to 1 or higher, it is not feasible for one teacher to implement and maintain for 25 individuals the following services:

1. An extensive diagnosis of the student's aptitude, achievement, interests, learning styles, and other qualities having implications for planning the individual program;
2. Individualized objectives;

3. The placing of each student at the point in the curriculum appropriate to his/her current knowledge and skills;

4. An individual set of resources and materials appropriately matched to the student's aptitudes, achievement, interests, and learning styles;

5. An expected rate and amount of learning appropriate to the person;

6. An individualized procedure for obtaining extensive information concerning student progress; and

7. A method of individualized evaluation and feedback.

This type of approach is not organizationally feasible in the public school system as it currently exists. Even if teachers *could* do it does not mean they *would* do it.

Neither is the individualized approach financially feasible. Though current teacher surpluses could easily reduce the teacher/student ratio to a number to make individualized education a reality, finances would not permit it. Supplying all of the written and audiovisual resources to make truly individualized instruction possible is also financially prohibitive. The limits in the economy of our nation's urban and suburban school districts prohibit an innovation on this large a scale, and teachers have demonstrated a greater willingness to purchase materials than to create them.

Even if an individualized instruction approach were possible both organizationally and financially, it is not now possible from a technical standpoint. The typical undergraduate teacher training program prepares students in the traditional manner of learning what it is that comprises the curriculum and suggests appropriate manners of instruction. It does not prepare its students with the highly sophisticated teaching skills of diagnosis, evaluation, and individual consulting and counseling methods that are essential to the individualized approach.

Nor do schools of education do a good job of preparing teachers for the group-centered classroom. After all, the basic model is the instructor-centered classroom. Even graduate students come back to get answers from professors who intellectualize that their jobs are to help formulate questions but whose behaviors are more typical of oracles and other infallible sources. It is little

wonder that teachers perceive themselves as people who have to have the answers and whose job it is to point out and correct errors. Such teachers are, unfortunately, easily replaced by machines.

Reasons for the Group-Centered Classroom

We urge a consideration of the group-centered classroom for several reasons:

1. The individual working alone is not excluded from so doing. In the group-centered classroom, there is a mutuality of tasks. Under skillful leadership, the potential of the individual is enhanced by the group. Group-centeredness does not imply that the individual is tyrannized by the group; it does mean that the person remains responsible to the group in terms of sharing and equality.

2. The teacher remains an integral part of the group. Unlike the instructor-centered classroom, the teacher facilitates rather than directs activity; and unlike the individualized classroom, the teacher works to establish a variety of helping relationships. The striving is for neither anarchistic, narcissistic independence nor a slave-like dependence, but for interdependence.

3. The group helps us to know what we are learning. One does not necessarily learn from experience but by *reflecting upon experience*. We know that it is possible to "experience" a printed page and learn nothing even when we understand each word. A discussion with others can often untangle our mental cobwebs. We must think about what we have done in order to gather meaning (learning) from it. Interaction with others helps us to clarify meaning.

4. Everyone has the opportunity to share in group successes. There is comfort in being with a group when attacking difficult problems or confronting a difficult concept. After watching an individual grow increasingly frustrated over a task requiring flexible thinking (that is, the ability to change one's perceptions; to remove mind sets), we can understand why those in groups do not display the same frustration. One does not mind feeling *stupid together* especially since the chances for success in solving the problem are increased.

5. Groups offer a greater probability for flexible thinking to occur. Although it is possible

for an individual to demonstrate greater flexible thinking, it is more likely that a group will bring different perspectives to the problem. The very fact that all human beings are biographically differentiated would support the notion that divergent ideas will emerge in an accepting group atmosphere. Simple experiments in grouping and regrouping quickly demonstrate the number of ideas that can be generated. Such fluency tends to breed flexibility.

6. One learns about one's self through interaction with others. We learn much more about ourselves when we can get feedback from others. The teacher is only one source of feedback and testing is only one kind. In literature, we learn about a person by what the character says, does, and what other characters including the narrator say about him or her. In real life, we learn who we are by what we can or cannot do, by what we choose to communicate, and by the way other people perceive us. Thus, to grow as a social being, interaction with others is obviously necessary.

7. A group-centered philosophy provides the practice necessary for relating to a culturally pluralistic society. No one lives in a vacuum, and few have the luxury of working and living only with their kind. Besides the obvious ethnic, racial, and sex differences, there are socioeconomic, political, intellectual, regional, and career variations in the people we meet. Feelings of inferiority or superiority develop, it seems, in segregated situations. Recognizing that people can make different kinds of contributions occurs in group-centered classrooms.

8. The group-centered classroom helps maintain a healthy social order. A current dilemma is the demand for greater discipline in schools. Yet, we know that authoritarian methods are anachronistic and cause rather than prevent some problems. The individualized approach has no built in mechanism for maintaining social order in the classroom. Since motivation must come from learning materials which teachers will likely not be able to afford or develop, or from the individualized attention for which teachers will not have time, we can predict boredom, rebellion, and demands for attention with which the teacher will not be able to cope. Better we turn the class over to the group and allow them

to be responsible for classroom problems whether they be behavior or learning problems. This would not mean the teachers neglect their leadership role, but that they are helped to lead by those they lead.

9. There is a body of literature and techniques available for the teacher who wants to implement a group-centered atmosphere.

In summary, we have presented a case against individualization of instruction based mainly in terms of logistics, financial unfeasibility, and social undesirability. We then present nine reasons in support of the group-centered classroom which argue for its desirability and its possibility. [7]

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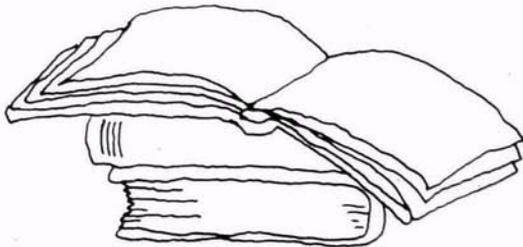
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