

# Individualized Learning: An Achievable Goal for All!

L. Leon Webb and Theresa E. Howard

*Nearly 1,000 teachers throughout Arizona have found the Arizona Consortium for Individualized Learning (ACIL) to be a "practical method" for individualizing classroom instruction.*

Many attempts have been and continue to be made to improve the instructional program available for students in the schools of today. Some of these attempts have met with failure; others have been labeled as innovative, but have been nonproductive as far as student outcomes are concerned. Only a few have met with notable success. By and large, most efforts to improve the instructional effectiveness of teachers in our schools today have met with the sad commentary of producing "no significant difference" when compared to commonly used instructional programs throughout the nation.

Much of the evaluation and research performed to determine the effectiveness of individualized instructional programs has been based on small samples in isolated classrooms or schools. The Arizona Consortium for Individualized Learning (ACIL) program, representing all students in 52 schools in grades K-6 (from a variety of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds throughout Arizona), has been subjected to a comprehensive evaluation concerning the effects of the program on student outcomes. Pretesting and post-testing

with the CTBS mathematics and reading subtests have been used to make this assessment for a random selection of approximately 3,000 students (representing approximately 26,000 students) in ACIL, and approximately 1,000 students in control schools.

The results have been conclusive. *Implementation of the ACIL process works for students, teachers, administrators, and parents.* Over a one and one-half year intervention period, student gains have been significantly greater ( $p = .001$ ) than control results in both reading and mathematics. The ACIL program has been validated for national dissemination through the National Innovation/Validation/Dissemination process, as well as approved for membership in the National Diffusion Network by the USOE/NIE Joint Dissemination Review Panel.

## Can Schools Really Make a Difference?

In 1975, Goodlad advanced the thought that "It is exceedingly doubtful that schools, as generally conceived and conducted, can make much

of a difference. The changes called for are profound."<sup>1</sup>

In a February 1976 article, George and Maxwell concluded:

In a time which has been described as education's Age of Individualized Instruction, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive evaluation of all instructional strategies, e.g., pretesting, self-evaluation, self-pacing, self-selection of instructional objectives, etc.<sup>2</sup>

As Goodlad has indicated, "The changes called for are profound," but they also are attainable by every educator with one attribute, a willingness to try some proven new ideas and techniques.

Four basic shortcomings are evident in many of the attempts to meet the individual needs of children:

1. Many teachers have attempted to establish a separate individual (tutorial) program for each child.

2. Many so-called "individualized programs" feature almost total reliance on materials that have been designed for use on an individual basis.

3. Little attention has been given to helping administrators and teachers learn the actual "process of individualizing instruction," or the "how to" phase of individualization.

4. Project directors or district level specialists placed in charge of individualized programs have commonly bypassed adequate involvement of the superintendent and the principal or instructional leader, thereby undermining support for continuation or expansion of the program.

For these reasons, many attempts to cater to individual needs have met with crushing failure.

### How Is an ACIL Classroom Different?

If you were to visit a classroom in which the ACIL process had been implemented, you would immediately observe several differences from the instructional program common to many American classrooms. Immediately, you would notice that there was no new magical potion that had been given to the teacher, student, or classroom. Yet, the ACIL classroom would feature a diagnostic-prescriptive instructional program de-



Even first graders are expected to build responsibility by keeping active records of their progress (Retrievals).

signed to meet individual student needs. Closer observation would reveal flexible grouping patterns to provide for instructional groups, needs groups for improving specific concept skills, and independent work to provide students with the opportunity to work alone or in small groups on activities identified by the teacher as meeting their needs.

You would see space being utilized more effectively, through identification of traffic patterns and utilization of consolidation of desks to allow for large group, small group, or independent work without moving furniture. Specific instructional areas would probably be labeled. Learning support materials and supplies would be accessible to students. Learning centers would be evident and in use as places for drill and application activities that are integral to the instructional program.

A short discussion with individual students in the classroom would establish the fact that these students know "what they are doing," "why they are doing it," and "what they will do when they finish their present work." Students are

<sup>1</sup> John I. Goodlad. "Schools Can Make a Difference." *Educational Leadership* 33(2): 108-17; November 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas W. George and Ann Maxwell. "The Validation of Individualized Instruction: A Glance at an Iceberg." *Educational Technology*; February 1976. p. 57.

happy to share their own records of "work to do" (Individual Retrieval Forms) and to discuss their progress toward achieving it.

Staying a little longer in a classroom would give you the opportunity to watch the teacher *teach the concept* to an appropriate group of students. This is done prior to assigning students to drill and application activities designed to strengthen their grasp of the concept to the mastery level. Oh, yes, it is different seeing first-grade students, or even kindergarten children pick up their *retrieval forms* and immediately go to perform the assigned school work.

You would quickly identify the curriculum as *concept-based*. Yet, the classroom atmosphere would reveal the fact that students are accepted and valued as worthwhile individuals and that top priority is given to helping students develop a *positive self-concept*. The display of work done by each student contributes to this atmosphere. In the ACIL program, development of a positive self-concept, responsible and independent behavior, as well as decision-making ability becomes equally as important as the development of basic skills in mathematics, reading, and writing.

As one can see, none of the components used in the ACIL process is new to education. (See Figure 1.) One can find various combinations of

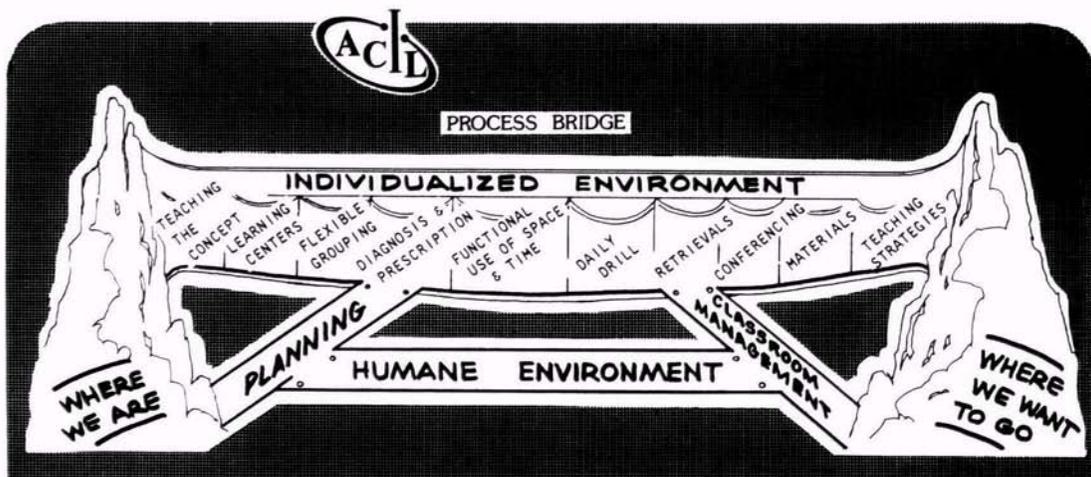
these components being used in classrooms throughout our nation. Even though the components are not new, the process whereby the components are installed, interrelated, and orchestrated in the classroom *is new!* A systematic program of in-service education for teachers, principals, and key district staff members makes the difference.

### Systematic Implementation of ACIL

ACIL utilizes a systematic approach to education that focuses on establishing a learning environment to meet the individual needs of all students. The areas of mathematics, reading, and writing through spelling are used as vehicles for installing the ACIL individualized environment in the classrooms of participating teachers. ACIL in-service programs are geared toward promoting the concept that administrators are individuals, teachers are individuals, and children are individuals. Each is always learning. Seminars and follow-up activities are geared toward helping administrators and teachers learn how to establish and manage an individualized learning environment in their schools and classrooms.

ACIL in-service programs are planned to provide input sessions for teaching the concept,

Figure 1. ACIL Process Bridge



The ACIL process bridge represents the components used to establish a practical path to individualized instruction.

as well as application activities for each component and the interactions of these components in the ACIL process. In-service seminars for administrators and teachers are oriented toward a "how to" approach to individualizing instruction. Emphasis in teacher seminars is placed on effective teaching and classroom management strategies. Administrative seminars place heavy emphasis on the refinement of effective educational leadership techniques.

Even though specific examples, which can be used for implementation of each concept, are utilized in the seminar presentations, participating administrators and teachers are encouraged to modify ideas or develop new ideas that will work for them, as long as the basic instructional concept is implemented in the classroom. Full implementation of the process into all subject areas is systematically phased into the classroom over a two-to-three-year period.

Experience with change strategies and implementation variables in the ACIL program has borne out the advice given by John Goodlad that: "The single school is the largest and proper unit for educational change."<sup>3</sup> The instructional staff acting as a team at a specific school is the smallest meaningful unit of educational change if the "sweeping reforms" called for are to be brought about and are to result in lasting instructional program improvement.

### ACIL Teachers and Students

In many "materials-oriented" individualized programs, students are expected to learn a concept through the use of and interaction with materials. The teacher has often become a coordinator of activities and a counselor, when assistance is needed.

In the ACIL process a teacher's *first* responsibility is to *teach*, not merely to coordinate program activities. Teaching for concept mastery, where the teacher works with student groups of appropriate size for the activity, is used to help students master specific concepts or ideas that have been diagnosed as *needs*. (See Figure 2.)

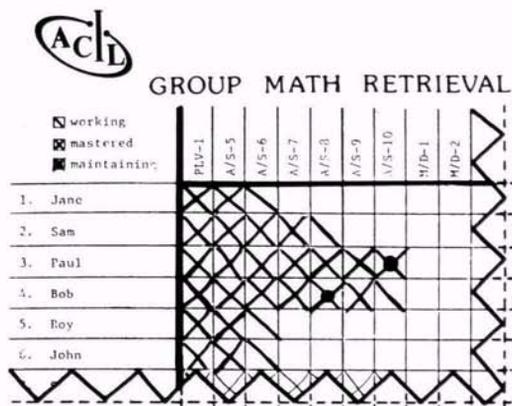
Closely related to teaching for concept mastery is the inclusion of short sessions of *daily drill* to ensure mastery of specific concepts or ideas. Drill sessions would be in the subject area in which the ACIL program is being implemented,

but should also be included on a regular basis in other skill-oriented subject areas.

With a well-designed presentation, teachers can teach a concept to a small group or large group of students in 10-15 minutes. Application of known teaching strategies would call for teacher input on each concept prior to assignment of students to drill and application activities to assist the student in learning the concept emphasized.

Grouping of students on a flexible basis is a key to success in individualizing instruction. This allows the teacher the opportunity to work with all students, a small group of students, or individual students. Different grouping patterns are used for different purposes. Normal instruction is given through a large group, small group, or individual basis, although most commonly this type of instruction would take place in a small group setting. *Needs group* instruction for assis-

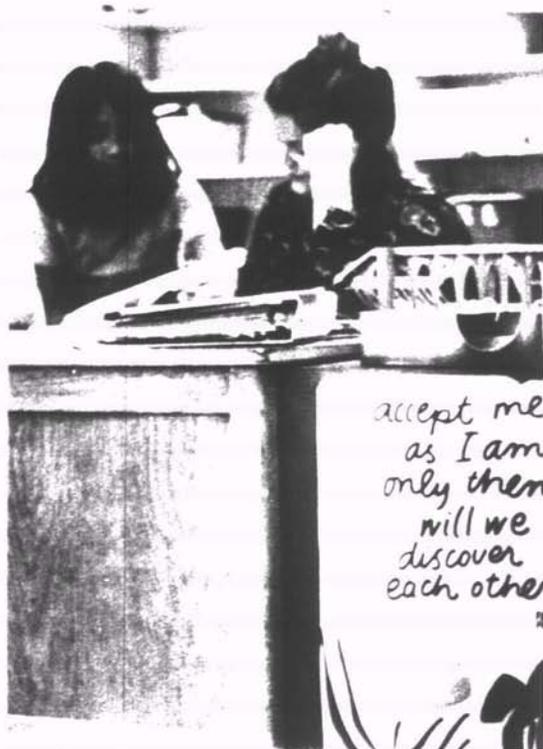
Figure 2. ACIL Group Math Retrieval



Group retrievals enable ACIL teachers and pupils to be constantly aware of each student's *concept mastery*.

tance with specific skill deficiencies most often is achieved in a small-group setting. Student independent learning activities, in which the student is given the opportunity to develop responsible and independent behavior and some opportunities to make decisions (within the limits established

<sup>3</sup> John Goodlad, *op. cit.*



*Teacher-student conferences provide important planning time and complement the ACIL humane environment.*

by the teacher), are extremely important to the student and are usually accomplished through small-group or individual activities.

Other components of the "individualized environment" include formal teacher conferences with students and the use of commitment sheets by students. Conducting formal conferences with each student on a regular basis helps to ensure appropriate diagnosis of needs and proper prescription of learning activities. ACIL teachers have a short, formal conference with each of their learners a minimum of once every two weeks. Continual, frequent informal contacts complement the more structured conferences.

Under supervision of the teacher, the use of commitment sheets provides opportunities for students to make commitments for learning and to develop responsible behavior by planning and selecting learning activities for an appropriate

time period. The extent of the use of commitment sheets varies with different age groups and student abilities to make responsible decisions. The types of decisions students would be allowed to make would normally be involved with independent or small-group learning activities.

The effective use of *learning strategies* and *teaching principles* is introduced the first year and is emphasized much more heavily during the second and third years of implementation. Application of learning principles, such as reinforcement, motivation, transfer, and retention, helps to focus teacher effort toward providing the most effective learning climate in the classroom. Effective use of teaching strategies helps teachers to meet the different needs of students. Refined techniques of diagnosing and prescribing for student needs, the use of grouping techniques, and the use of a variety of teaching methods are but a few of the various teaching strategies emphasized in the ACIL program.

The smooth running interaction and interrelationship of the components discussed in the previous section have become what is known as the ACIL Process of Instruction. Nearly 1,000 teachers throughout Arizona have found this process to be a practical method of attempting to meet the needs of their students. Evaluation data have been conclusive—the process works for students, teachers, administrators, and parents.

Individualized learning, defined as "providing the most nearly appropriate task possible for each learner, given a specific teacher and the resources available to him/her at a specific point in time," is indeed an achievable goal for all! [F]



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