

Teaching for Individual and Cultural Differences: A Necessary Interaction

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Most teachers do believe in "individualizing" their instruction. Indicated here are ways in which that individualized instruction can be strengthened.

Education programs designed to develop teachers who can work effectively with ethnically and culturally diverse students must grow out of theories of cultural differences, as contrasted with theories of cultural deficiencies. Briefly, the "deficit" argument takes the position that the minority child is "unready" for school because of a deficient home environment that retards the child's overall development and leads to a disadvantage in school. The burden is on the child to catch up to his or her middle-class counterparts. The "difference" position, on the other hand, argues that we live in a polycultural society with monocultural schools (basically Anglo middle-class in orientation). This viewpoint accuses the school of unreadiness, rather than the child.¹

The literature abundantly attests to the deleterious effects of educational programs that grow out of the "deficit" theory. These effects are vividly illustrated by the results of such programs as those designed to teach reading (in Standard English) to children who have oral language skills in languages other than Standard English, and which otherwise violate the norms of communication, learning, and participation brought to school by the children these programs are designed to serve.

Attempts to develop intercultural sensitivity among teachers need to focus on the differences among groups. However, focusing on cultural differences alone is not enough. Even though we are cautioned not to "over-generalize" and to

remember that "no single group has a monopoly on any characteristic," the fact is that emphasizing differences often does lead to stereotyping.² What is needed is a combined focus on patterns of cultural and individual differences. Such a combination is more effective than either component alone because it works (a) to lessen invalid stereotyping, and (b) to develop a generic sensitivity to the cultural orientations of each child.

As stated by Garcia, "Cultural differences that need the attention and sensitivity of the teacher are going to come with individuals. Sometimes, there will be several students with the same needs. The important thing is for the teacher to help protect individuality through recognition and acceptance of cultural differences. The teacher should be aware of those instances when the student is acting or reacting in ways that were not anticipated."³

Teachers who possess a generic cultural sensitivity have the ability to detect potential cultural differences and can use this information as a filter for approaching individual differences. Sensitivity of this nature helps alleviate the problem that teachers cannot become knowledgeable about all the potential points of cultural conflict among all

¹ See, for example: Frederick Williams. *Language and Poverty*. Chicago: A. Markham Publishing Company, 1970.

² Robert A. LeVine and Donald T. Campbell. *Ethnocentrism: Theories of Conflict, Ethnic Attitudes, and Group Behavior*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1972; Howard Z. Ehrlich. *The Social Psychology of Prejudice*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1973.

³ Ernest F. Garcia. "Chicano Cultural Diversity: Implications for Competency Based Teacher Education." Eric Documents, ED091375, May 1974. p. 15.

the students they are likely to teach in the future. Teachers with this type of sensitivity should be able to cue into, get information about, and develop understanding of familiar and unfamiliar sources of cultural conflict.

It is possible that there are requisite psychological orientations, such as some degree of open-mindedness, to the development of a generic cultural sensitivity. But beyond such requisites, there are at least two clusters of "teachable skills":

1. Teachers can learn to conceptualize culture in terms of the important components of any

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culture that tend to set groups apart from each other (for example, communication patterns, myths, customs of diet and dress, and the arts). This conceptualization can serve as a means for examining the cultural orientations of individuals in the classroom, and may initially be developed out of a series of cultural case studies and/or field experiences.

2. Teachers can learn to identify and work with those characteristics of individual learners that cause the learner to behave differently from that which the school commonly anticipates. These characteristics may or may not grow out of cultural differences and would include the learner's cognitive style, learning skills, values, and preferred means of participation and communication.

In the past, "individualized instruction" has been attacked as inherently Anglo-European and a source of problems for many microcultural⁴ students. This is understandable if one remembers that "During the 1960's, individualized instruction was associated with teaching machines and programmed texts, and conjured up images of a single learner alone in timeless space, facing a panel board with several control knobs, and responding to lists of stimuli that had been previ-

ously tested and sequenced in a manner that ensured successful learning."⁵ Abrahams and Gay explain why this type of "individualization" has negative implications for many black students whose orientations toward learning involve peer cooperation, active interchange, and simultaneous physical, emotional, and intellectual responses.⁶

However, "individualized instruction" need not be so narrowly conceived. In its truest sense, individualized instruction is based on an immediate understanding of important characteristics of the individual learners who are experiencing a given program. What are these characteristics? The list would include such qualities as the learner's personal goals, values, aptitudes, understandings, learning and language skills, self-image, and physical health.

Many times teachers can use similar cues for understanding the learning characteristics of culturally diverse students. However, at times there are important learner characteristics that cannot be identified through the filter of the teachers' own culturally determined perceptions. To the degree that teachers are ignorant of extant patterns of cultural differences in their classroom, they will be unable adequately to individualize the instruction of learners whose cultural orientation is different from their own. On the other hand, teachers must guard against faulty generalizations that ascribe certain cultural characteristics to *all* of the members of a given ethnic or racial group. For example, it would be erroneous for teachers to assume that all of their native American students eschew competitive learning activities, or, more obviously, that all of their black students "have rhythm." The point is that individualizing instruction helps avoid stereotyping while a consideration of cultural differences sensi-

⁴ The term microcultural refers to ethnic, racial, economic, or religious groups exhibiting characteristic patterns of behavior and/or perception sufficient to distinguish them from others within an embracing culture, or macroculture.

⁵ Harriet Talmage, editor. *Systems of Individualized Education*. Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1975. p. 36.

⁶ Roger D. Abrahams and Geneva Gay. "Black Culture in the Classroom." In: Roger D. Abrahams and Rudolph C. Troike, editors. *Language and Cultural Diversity in American Education*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972. pp. 67-84.

tizes teachers to patterns that might otherwise be overlooked.

What follows is a brief discussion of three areas of interaction between teaching for individual and cultural differences. Hopefully, this will suggest ways teachers can be more effective with culturally different learners by attempting to "individualize." It should also suggest ways teachers can more effectively individualize their teaching if they are aware of cultural differences.

Identifying Meaningful Objectives

Behavioral objectives are central to many programs of individualized instruction. How closely these objectives match the learner's needs determines how individualized the program really is. The risk that a program is not meeting individual needs is great when planners and implementers are insensitive to the cultural orientations of the prospective students. For example, Gans describes the working and lower classes of this society as being deeply fatalistic, lacking interest in personal development and object goals, and as valuing the family and its maintenance above all else.⁷ To the degree that these characteristics may be ascribed to a particular child, they must be considered during the process of identifying objectives for this child's learning.

Jack Edling has developed a conceptualization of individualized instruction that categorizes programs in terms of who determines the objectives, school or learner, and who selects the media, school or learner.⁸ No mention is made of individual and cultural differences as input. It is assumed learners will select objectives and media that match their perceived needs and style of learning. What about programs whose objectives and/or media are determined by the school? Here the sensitivity and awareness of program developers and decision makers to individual and cultural differences is critical. For example, available options must include alternatives for different learning styles, values, interests, and information readiness, as well as different norms of communication and participation.

Identifying Conceptual Styles

Conceptual styles are information processing habits that comprise the learner's mode of ab-

straction and mode of perception. Modes of abstraction are often described as being somewhere along a continuum of reflective or abstract thought, to sensing or concrete thought. Perceptual modes are sometimes described as being relatively field-independent or field-sensitive. Witkin and others have extensively researched characteristics of field-dependent (global) and field-independent (analytic) cognitive styles. They suggest important ways an individual's cognitive style can influence how and what is learned.⁹ Most schools

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tend to be geared to the highly analytic learner who can think abstractly.

Rita and Kenneth Dunn define learning style as "the manner in which at least 18 different elements from four basic stimuli affect a person's ability to absorb and retain."¹⁰ Stimuli are environmental (for example, sound, light, temperature, and design); emotional (for example, motivation, persistence, responsibility, and structure); sociological (for example, peers, self, pair, team, adult, varied); and physical (for example, perceptual, intake, time, mobility). The possible combinations are numerous, suggesting that few people learn in exactly the same way.

Obviously it would be helpful for teachers who wish to individualize instruction to be cogni-

⁷ Herbert Gans. *The Urban Villagers*. New York: The Free Press, 1962.

⁸ Jack Edling. Cited in: "Individualized Instruction: Its Nature and Effects." Department of Audiovisual Instruction, NEA Filmstrips, 1972.

⁹ For example: Herman A. Witkin, Carol Ann Moore, and Frederick J. McDonald. "Cognitive Style and the Teaching/Learning Process." AERA Cassette Series, 1974 3F.

¹⁰ Rita Dunn and Kenneth Dunn. "Learning Style as a Criterion for Placement in Alternative Programs." *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 1974. pp. 275-78.

zant of individual learning styles. This knowledge may be especially helpful regarding students who are having difficulties in school and/or whose cultural orientations differ from the school. There is some evidence that microcultural children tend to be more field dependent.¹¹ Furthermore, recent research on bicultural children suggests that children who can operate effectively in two socio-cultural systems tend to be bicognitive. That is, they tend to be able to use both field-independent and field-sensitive orientations.¹² A learner who is bicognitive appears to have certain advantages, such as greater flexibility of thought. It is also possible that certain learning styles tend to be predominant in certain cultures. For example, a Navaho child might learn most effectively through quiet observation, while a black child might learn best in settings that allow mobility, peer cooperation, and a variety of perceptual stimuli.

Measuring Intelligence and Achievement

Most schools operate on highly standardized procedures of evaluation and administration. To a degree this is necessary, but standardization carries with it the seeds of unadaptability when it is based largely upon macrocultural norms. For example, standardized testing allows Spanish-speaking children no time to "catch up" on language skills, gives no credit for different cultural experiences, and penalizes a highly individualized curriculum.¹³

The currently used "culture-free" nonverbal tests also discriminate. According to Cohen, their stress on "logical" reasoning represents the most culture-bound aspects of the middle-class, or "analytic," way of thinking.¹⁴ In fact, Cohen would argue that nonverbal tests of intelligence are much more discriminating against field sensitive (field-dependent) learners than are conventional instruments, that test partly for information growth.

An alternative to standardized testing is testing for the achievement of competencies developed on the basis of known needs. This form of testing corresponds directly to the goals of such individualized instruction programs as Mastery Learning, PLAN, and IGE. It is a proposal frequently suggested by educators who are concerned about the high rate of "failure" among many

microcultural students. When we talk about non-standardized testing programs for the culturally different, we often stir up accusations of "lower standards for minorities." Such attacks are less likely when we talk about nonstandardized testing programs designed to determine the readiness of an individual learner and to measure the learner's progress toward a particular goal.

In considering these three areas of interaction between individual and cultural differences, we must also deal with a deep concern of many teachers. Teachers often fear that by noting cultural differences among their students, they will be labeled as racist. This is related to an ill-founded tendency to equate color-consciousness with racism. It also stems from feelings that differences are "bad" or inferior, and from the mistaken notion that the recognition of differences implies a necessity to imitate or *adopt* these differences. Many "cultural awareness" and "human relations" workshops have failed because these basic concerns of the participants were not dealt with.

On the other hand, most teachers do believe in "individualizing" their instruction. That individualized instruction can be strengthened by a sensitivity to cultural differences must be recognized. [E]

¹¹ Manuel Ramirez III and Alfredo Castañeda. *Cultural Democracy, Bicognitive Development, and Education*. New York: Academic Press, 1974.

¹² Alfredo Castañeda and Tracy Gray. "Bicognitive Processes in Multicultural Education." *Educational Leadership* 32(3):203-207; December 1974.

¹³ Mario Benitez. "A Blueprint for the Education of the Mexican Americans." *ERIC Documents* ED076294, March 1973. 9 pp.

¹⁴ Rosalie Cohen. "Conceptual Styles, Cultural Conflict, and Nonverbal Tests of Intelligence." *The American Anthropologist* 71:238-43; 1969.



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