

Accommodating Individual Differences

Carma M. Hales

The patchwork curriculum comprises various courses designed to fit specific educational needs. This is accommodating individual differences; this is individualized instruction.

The childhood pastime of cutting out look-alike paper dolls connected to one another in a row is a skill that is easily acquired. A pair of scissors, properly folded paper, and the small motor skills needed are all that are necessary. Given time, even a beginner can produce an assembly line of look-alike figures resembling humans. If people were like paper dolls, schooling would be simple, and results could be absolutely guaranteed.

In the real world the teacher in a classroom meets students who, like the dolls in a row, are connected. Because of age, years in school, or some other common criterion, a group is formed and a classroom identity established. Then, when students begin to interact, their individuality comes through. No two are exactly alike. There is variability found in learners' emotional, social,

and physical reactions as well as their intellectual readiness to learn specific concepts or skills. A student's personality cannot be segmented for instructional purposes. Although it is desirable for students to become independent, responsible, and knowing, it is also accepted that students come into classrooms as generally irresponsible and dependent individuals. The challenge to the teacher is to accept each learner, no matter what the individual's pattern is like. Then, it is the teacher's task to help each child grow and learn as much as he/she can.

It is here that learning occurs in spite of us. As educators, to channel learning into desired directions is our challenge. It follows that the more accurate the diagnosis of student needs and prescription of tasks to be accomplished is, the more potential there is for effective outcome.

Student/Task Harmony

Individualization of instruction is important because it represents a conscious effort to reach desired goals for students. It is not, and should never be, an end in itself. The term, widely confused and misunderstood, has become a catch-all phrase. Specialists in the field of education have attempted to agree upon the essential elements that describe it. Student-paced programs, self-selection, discovery activities, programmed materials, team-teaching, and continuous progress are terms sometimes associated with it. The relationship of each may, or may not, be appropriate. If the combination of students, tasks, and teachers is compatible, individualization is occurring. If they are not, individual needs are not being met. When students are engaged in the process of learning, there must be challenge. There must also be activity, but activity for activity's sake is not appropriate. To be busy may be an indicator of involvement, but it is not a guarantee of a student's acquiring essential conceptual building blocks. Having materials available of multileveled difficulty and difference in modality, while a step in the right direction, does not guarantee that students are achieving. If material is too difficult, a student is placed in a failing position from which he/she cannot escape. On the other hand, if the material is too simple, there is no growth in the direction desired. The key is that the student and the curriculum must be synchronized. The teacher continuously searches for ways to bring these elements into closer harmony with one another. Doing this one step at a time makes the task of accommodating individual differences possible.

Planning and Organizing

First to be considered are planning procedures that will help to maximize effort effectiveness. Organization, resource management, matching of task with learner, and building individual and group interaction patterns for a classroom are necessary foundations for effective instruction.

Materials development or identification is done with learner usefulness as criterion for work or selection. The structure, or nature of what is to be taught, dictates partially, at least, how it is

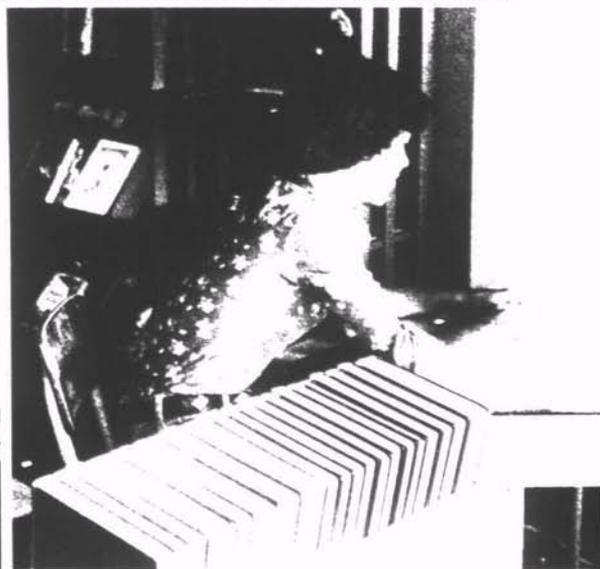
taught. Arithmetic, for example, has an organized conceptual structure that lends itself to being taught in a step-by-step manner. A student cannot multiply three digit numbers unless addition with regrouping has been mastered. It is a fairly simple procedure for a teacher to identify quickly and accurately where learning deficiencies occur and assist students with mastering necessary entering behaviors for new concepts to be met. Because of this, students can be pretested, a concept identified for work, the concept taught, concrete practice given that relates the new learning to that which is already known, feedback of results provided, skill developed, a post-test given, and a student given opportunity to apply the concept learned. In each case, conceptual development moves from awareness and familiarity with an idea to application and internalization of the idea. Both the teacher and the student know where he/she is, has been, and is going.

Some other content areas do not lend themselves to sequential step-by-step study as well as arithmetic does. For instance, social studies and science activities can be reviewed in a simple or complex way. There is no set hierarchy of knowledge bits needed for a primary grade child to deal with content such as "weather and my life," as opposed to a topic such as "getting to know baby animals." In such areas, decisions concerning "what to teach when" are quite arbitrary. In order to make wise curricular decisions, the use of models designed as guides to be used in determining what and how to teach can be helpful. Representative of such models for conceptualizing individualization of instruction include the work of Carroll (1963), Edling (1970), PREP (1970), Walberg (1971-1975), Gibbons (1970), and Talmage (1975). In these and other attempts, several ways have been identified in which content can be ordered or organized for instruction. Included are programs in which every step is carefully detailed. In these every student begins at a specific point on a continuum and completes the content in a linear way. In other situations students begin together but branch off into many possible routes that enable them to arrive at a final point or points. Curriculum can be organized in everything from a tightly controlled to a totally open-ended framework for instruction.

An important fact to remember is that the



Photos clockwise from top show a teacher-child learning sequence.



Photos: courtesy of the author.



same objectives and activities may appeal differently to and produce different outcomes, when used with different students. Objectives are valuable tools for providing direction. Outcomes, however, are not always predictable. Each child is born into a unique life space. The child is not like a paper doll. His/her potential for development is influenced by the total environment and the human potential that is brought to it. Parents, or significant other adults, siblings, friends, the physical environment, and social institutions, all influence the child in the discovery of what it means to be human.

The hungry child of poverty views the world with a different set of eyes than the child of affluence. Each is vulnerable to surrounding opportunities. "Street smart" and "book smart" are not synonyms. One does not necessarily prepare a person for the other.

If value is placed on critical thinking and creativity, divergence in outcome is perceived as often desirable. New ideas or arrangements of ideas should be encouraged. Students should learn to stretch their "mind's eye" to see beyond the obvious. The effective teacher recognizes the importance of a knowledge base and uses this base as a foundation for application of what is learned. Then both old and comfortable ideas and new uncharted ones can influence a student in building a unique world of experience.

Continuous intellectual pioneering is an important force in students' development. The life-long learner is not an accident. Those who continue to seek are infected early in life with an intellectual curiosity. This is an infection that permeates the organism and, if one is lucky, continues to grow with time. A closed curriculum provides a cure for curiosity. It locks people into ruts and abandons the notion that "knowing and continuous growing" are mutually supportive ideas.

Building Environment

Building an individualized environment is an ongoing process. There are several variables to consider. These include:

1. Students and a teacher—These are the basic elements. The teacher must teach. The teacher's task is to motivate and capture the at-



tending behavior of each student, to teach, to provide monitored practice, and to ensure that learning develops to the application level.

2. A humane environment—This is an atmosphere in which each learner is accepted and valued as an individual of dignity and worth. It is one in which caring for self and others is nurtured. This is an ongoing process that requires consistent teacher responsiveness to students' social and emotional needs.

3. An effective management structure—Such a structure is one in which there is order and discipline, and in which expectations are known. Emphasis is placed on positive approaches and development of self-discipline and responsibility. Resources to be used are organized for immediate access. Students know where things are and what to do. Records are kept by both learners and the teacher in order that both may be always aware of where a student is, has been, and is ready next to grow. There is a physical environment in which large group, small group, and individual student activities can occur simultaneously as needed. This means that experiences and space are organized so that totally teacher-directed, partially teacher-directed, and student-directed activities can occur at the same time without one interfering with the other.

4. Teaching skill—This requires that a teacher consciously apply principles of learning, diagnosis, prescription, conferencing, and evaluation as he or she continues to work toward improvement of instruction.

Management Realities

Once a program is set in motion, the teacher has to decide at each decision point what is best to do. The teaching climate will never be totally responsive to students' needs. If a teacher has management and teaching skills, however, it is possible to more nearly approximate an ideal arrangement. Vital procedures include knowing how content to be taught is structured, and then organizing it for instruction. Next, identification or development of appropriate resource materials is done. This is followed by development of ongoing, simple but accurate, record-keeping systems kept both by students and the teacher. These records should be designed to provide immediate feedback. Finally, formal and informal interaction patterns, including conferences, need to be established to ensure that students and teachers have oral as well as written feedback. With these components initiated, students and teachers know where they are and have the necessary foundation for making wise decisions about what next to do.

Past or present individualization attempts have included all or some of the procedures discussed. Where significant differences have been made in student outcomes, careful attention has been paid to the procedures reviewed. In no case of successful implementation have content or materials alone been considered to be the total program. Regardless of the age of the student or management arrangement, the general procedures necessary for maintaining a responsive learning climate are the same.

Current Efforts Reviewed

Some of the current efforts to individualize include the Winnetka Plan, The Westinghouse Learning Project (PLAN), Individually Prescribed Instruction (IPI), The Duluth Experience, The University of California Laboratory School Experience, Individually Guided Education (IGE), and the Utah System Approach to Individualized Learning (U-SAIL) Project. Also currently successful are 12 federally funded, locally designed individualization efforts identified by the United States Office of Education as "Educational Programs That Work."

In addition, a variety of specialized curriculum products have been developed. These are designed to be used to operationalize individualized instruction. Computer-assisted instructional products, programmed materials and multi-leveled, self-pacing activities with attendant student feedback have become part of the American school practitioner's available resources. In the EPIE report, number 46, on evaluating individualized materials, it was indicated that while such instruction is in its primitive stages of development, it is a rising tide that receives its impetus from the accumulated data of psychology on individual differences and the cultural movement that have emphasized individual development and choice.

Summary

The fact that individualized instruction is an important part of the American patchwork curriculum quilt is not disputed. That each individual has value and inalienable rights is fundamental to the beliefs of our society.

While the appropriate task for every learner remains a goal not yet reached, it is a goal worthy of every educator's lifetime effort. It is not incompatible with emphasis on basic skills. It simply places the top priority on people rather than things and on "continuously becoming" rather than upon "having arrived."

If there is a conscious effort to provide the most nearly appropriate task possible for learners given the teacher, his or her resources, and the time available, there is focus on individuals. When the patchwork is reviewed and each block's place is understood, it may be concluded that wherever there is a conscious attempt to better reach students, there is accommodation of individual differences. [E]



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