



What Are Teachers Like Who Use a Personalized Approach?

Elliott Seif

Teachers who use a personalized approach say their goal is individual development. Their classrooms are highly organized but informal, and they think of students as individuals.

Successfully developed individualized, personalized classrooms can be found scattered throughout schools and school districts. When I visit these types of classrooms, I am struck by their consistent patterns and their apparently productive routines. Classroom life is informal, yet highly structured. Children are working productively, both individually and in small groups. There is an atmosphere of learning and growth, and a feeling that significant learning is occurring, often unmeasured by traditional achievement tests.

In a recent study I attempted to discover how such teachers view the teaching and learning process, view themselves and their development as teachers, and view children. My purpose was to discover common characteristics in the thoughts, ideas, and descriptions of the styles of these teachers that could explain their ability to organize such classrooms.¹

Eight teachers who consistently and successfully implement individualized, personalized learning in their classrooms were interviewed, in depth, for the study. These teachers varied in teaching experiences and represented a cross section of elementary school grade levels K-6 in Philadelphia inner-city schools, but all of them had similar teaching styles. The inter-

views generated a series of categories focusing on definitions of individualized, personalized learning; teacher goals; descriptions of teaching styles; and personal development.

The interviewed teachers were asked what the term "individualized, personalized teaching and learning" meant to them. Their answers suggest a focus on meeting the needs of students in diverse ways, such as by making "some part of the lesson important to each child—to give each child some sense that this lesson is important to them."

To meet student needs, one teacher emphasizes the use of manipulative materials while another stresses a choice-centered program. Their commitment to a "meeting student needs" psychological focus is important in their teacher decision making and teaching styles. Their goals, classroom practices and personal development, described here, are consistent with and seem to grow out of this common, underlying perception, and appear to be a conceptual link between their past, present, and future thinking about teaching.

Teaching Goals

The teachers interviewed emphasize a variety of goals, the most common being the development of a

¹ Elliott Seif. *A Study of Individualized, Personalized Teaching*. 63 pp. (Mimeographed.) The study details more fully the concepts outlined here, as well as others, and includes many more examples of statements by the teachers themselves. The study was partially funded by a grant from Temple University, and is available through ERIC, ED 161 864.

sense of personal adequacy among the students. They hope to "give them [students] a feeling of self-worth and self-confidence because so few of them have that." They believe that an important part of their job is to "build up their [students'] egos" and help these children achieve success and develop the feeling in themselves that they can succeed.

A second goal, fostering multifaceted "self-expression," was stressed by several of the teachers. Expressive activities designed to "show the kids that their own expression is valuable" are developed and implemented by most of the teachers, and include arts and crafts activities, writing activities, oral speaking, reading, and other language arts experiences. The use of a variety of modes of self-expression is seen by some as a way to develop the whole personality of the child and to develop their self-esteem and personal adequacy.

A third goal, both explicitly and implicitly stated by all the teachers, is to help children take greater responsibility for their own learning—to help them become more independent learners. The teachers stress classroom structures and practices that gradually lead students to take greater responsibility for their own learning.

A fourth goal, paradoxically, is interdependence, helping students learn to work together and to "feel responsible for anyone who is not making it." The teachers emphasize getting the children to live comfortably with one another and developing a sense of group responsibility.

Finally, there was a strong emphasis on developing basic academic skills. The teachers continually, in their classroom practices as well as their goals, emphasize the learning of basic reading skills, comprehension, writing, and mathematics. Generally these goals coincide with those of most teachers, but differences exist over the methods for achieving them.

Complex Classrooms

The teachers interviewed organize complex, varied classrooms, related to their goals, their students, and their teaching styles. Some teachers, for example, begin a year with nearly the same schedule they follow during the year, except with fewer activities and less variety. Other teachers begin a year with structured, large group activities. In all cases, the beginning of a year is used to diagnose ability levels, problems, interests, and behaviors of the children. Beginnings are also used to clarify rules, develop routines, and practice types of tasks.

The teachers of young children are more likely to begin with a basic schedule followed throughout the year, whereas older children spend more time working together as a larger group. As children become used



to the structure of the classroom and are prepared to take more responsibility for their own learning, more variety is added to the classroom structure and more individualization develops. Gradually more complex classroom schedules and procedures are implemented.

Classrooms are generally characterized by a highly structured yet informal style of teaching. Generally, as children enter their classrooms they are made to feel comfortable and find things to do on their own or with the help of the teacher. It is a relaxed time but, as with most times in the teaching day, there are strong expectations that the children will be doing some educationally constructive activity such as a game or even talking and discussing something with other children. The teacher uses this time to learn more about the children, usually through informal conversation and observations.

A group meeting often follows for sharing events, discussing experiences, planning for the day, working on class problems. Meeting agendas are spontaneous and flexible, yet most of the teachers plan for specific items they wish to discuss. Many of the teachers follow this with a choice time, providing many varied activities with different modes of self-expression, such as games, inquiry activities, block building, creative writing, bookmaking, dramatic play, and puzzles. In some cases, especially in the upper grades, choice time includes a diverse set of learning center activities in different subject areas such as science and social studies. In many classes small groups work closely with the teacher while other children work at independent tasks. Children are able to work together and learn from each other; stress is placed on cooperative as well as on individualized learning. Choice time activities often complement skills work, providing reinforcing activities for work done at other times.

Mathematics is usually taught in a more formal way. One teacher, whose children in past years dra-

matically improved in math, has small group mathematics instruction for some while other students are working on other tasks. As he works with them, he stresses improving the children's perceptions of their ability to succeed. He calls this approach a "con job." For example, he convinces students that the work he gives them is harder for them than he thinks it really



Elliott Seif is Professor of Education, Temple University, Philadelphia.

is. As they successfully complete the work, their confidence increases.

The teachers interviewed stress figuring out ways to meet the needs of individual children. They attempt to understand the children in their classes, to motivate them, to help them learn to express themselves. The teachers try continuously to describe, observe, and analyze clinically what they see. They "spend a lot of time watching and making notes . . . and listening to students." They regularly use some form of record-keeping, usually daily or weekly notes, to keep their observations and analyses. They use multiple formal and informal measures of performance and struggle to understand each child.

Their individualized approach enables them to concentrate periodically on different children who are having difficulties and try to work out problems. They use their analyses to help them react to different students with different approaches. For example, a teacher might create strong boundaries and rules for one child, while another child might need sympathy and permissiveness.

They do not blame children or excuse themselves or the home for what happens in classrooms, but experiment with different ways to motivate children and solve classroom problems until they find ways that work (within a humanistic framework). Their psychological analyses of children are intimately intertwined with their cognitive analyses, making it difficult to separate the two in theory and practice. They are truly concerned with the whole child.

Continual Development

This study supports Combs' thesis that perceptions, attitudes, and growth are a most important part of teaching.² These teachers continually learn from their

experiences and search for ways to become better teachers, in spite of difficulties. They have a great deal of personal self-esteem and exhibit many of the characteristics of self-actualized persons, such as problem-centeredness, acceptance of self and others, superior perception of reality, detachment, autonomy, creativity, and so on.³

Each of these teachers seems to have a perceptual framework that includes concern and caring for others, and their complex skills in creating caring school environments have been developed over time. They are flexible, varying their behavior based on their assessment of individual situations. They are unusually persistent in the face of difficulties, such as in their dealings with other staff members, difficult children, and difficult teaching situations. They tend to search for support for their points of view and for open communication, even in the face of strong opposition to their teaching approaches.

Focus on Individual Development

This study suggests that educators interested in developing individualized, personalized styles of teaching need to focus on individual development as well as patterns of teaching. Teachers need to clarify their goals and priorities. They need to focus on their own needs and on their personal development. They need many skills for clinically observing, interacting in a variety of ways with, developing positive expectations for, and promoting feelings of success in students. They can be helped in developing flexible instructional strategies gradually over time. They can learn skills for solving problems and making decisions, and in building a supportive school environment for their educational approach. They need to realize that teaching skill development is a gradual process, fraught with many difficulties and frustrations.

Studies such as this can help educators understand teaching and learning in a variety of settings. I believe that researchers need to conduct similar studies based on careful observation and description of the "best" classrooms, teachers, and learning environments with varied goals and approaches.⁴ Careful documentation over time can provide us with significant information about teaching styles and the learning process. *EL*

² See, Arthur Combs. "Teacher Education: The Person in the Process." *Educational Leadership* 35(7): 558-62; April 1978.

³ See, Abraham Maslow. *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper and Row, 1954.

⁴ For an example of such a study, see: Jere Brophy and Carolyn Evertson. *Learning From Teaching: A Developmental Perspective*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1976.

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