

By all indications, individualized instruction had its heyday in the late 60s.

# The Rise and Decline of Individualized Instruction

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What is the status of individualized instruction? Has interest peaked and is it now declining? Will interest surge again in the late 80s?

In order to gauge the state of practice in individualized instruction, I scanned commercial advertisements in an education magazine, examined entries on the topic in *Education Index* and ERIC, polled experts in the field, and surveyed teachers regarding their familiarity with and use of individualization.

A spot check of advertisements in *Instructor* showed that interest peaked in September and October 1973 with 11 ads in each month. Commercial companies in the education field were trying to sell individualized products in media, spelling, activity books, reading, records and cassettes, furniture, handwriting, geography, mathematics, linguistic phonic kits, reading centers, library kits, and the like.

Interestingly enough, five years later some of the same products were still being advertised although the term "individualized" was no longer used. One ad states, "In 1969 educators could choose from dozens of individualized basic skills programs. In 1979 one outstanding program remains." Only one ad was found in each of the March 1978, 1979, and 1980 issues of *Instructor*.

While this survey is hardly statistically significant, it is a sensitive barometer of the education climate. No company selling educational materials will stay in business if it ignores what is going on in schools. On this basis the term "individualized" is nearly extinct in educational advertising.

I also examined the listings on individualized instruction. Individually Guided Education, and individualized math and science in *Education Index*. The number of entries on these topics for the years 1910 through 1981 is shown in Figure 1.

Several observations regarding this data are relevant. First, increases in later years are related to the tremendous increase in publications on all topics during these years. Second, the reader should note that volumes of *Education Index* cover three-year periods from 1910 to 1953 and two-year periods from 1953 to 1981. Students of the topic are well aware of the movement in the late 1920s led by Parker, Packhurst, Washburne, and others. The concepts are not dead; published research indicates strong interest, although *Education Index* entries dropped from a high of 134 in 1977-1979 to 108 in 1979-1981.

ERIC listings indicate that the individualized instruction movement peaked in the mid 70s (Figure 2). You simply weren't with it then as a teacher, a writer for government projects, or a professor of education if you didn't speak the I.I. language. It should be noted, though, that research is published several years after it is done. A surge of ERIC listings during any year might actually indicate earlier interest.

I next polled 30 authorities on individualized instruction who had administered programs, done research, written or lectured on the topic, or who were known in the field. Approximately 50 percent responded to my questions: Had it all been for naught? Was individualization the impossible dream of the 60s? Had there been spinoff from the movement? (Figure 3, p. 530)

The experts agreed that computer-assisted instruction and the student contract have had little positive influence.

Only homogeneous grouping, non-graded elementary schools, and individualized reading have had much impact. It should be noted that John Goodlad, among others, objected to including homogeneous grouping because he believes it works exactly opposite to individualizing.

Authorities believed that most other individualized approaches were not widely used, with the exceptions of learning centers and games and boxed laboratory materials. These materials and activities permit students to work at their own pace, whether or not they select the actual project.

Comments by these experts were revealing. For example, in response to the question, "Why does individualized instruction seem to be in difficulty and perhaps on the decline?", several wrote that to individualize from a humanizing approach is too demanding, too costly, too difficult (Harriet Talmage, Wayne Otto, John Goodlad). John Thomas noted that "we do not always attract committed and capable enough teachers who can successfully individualize, nor do their administrators adequately support them." Vincent Rogers thought the movement was poorly conceptualized: "We moved too quickly without offering the necessary staff development for teachers, preparation for students in areas of self-discipline, self-direction. . . ." Others indicated that teachers did not fully understand what they were doing.

Or, as Samuel Postlethwait, an early leader in the individualized laboratory at the college level said, "In the U.S. we have developed a long history of how learning occurs in the master teacher tradition and this will not be overcome very quickly just because the new learning system is 'right.'"

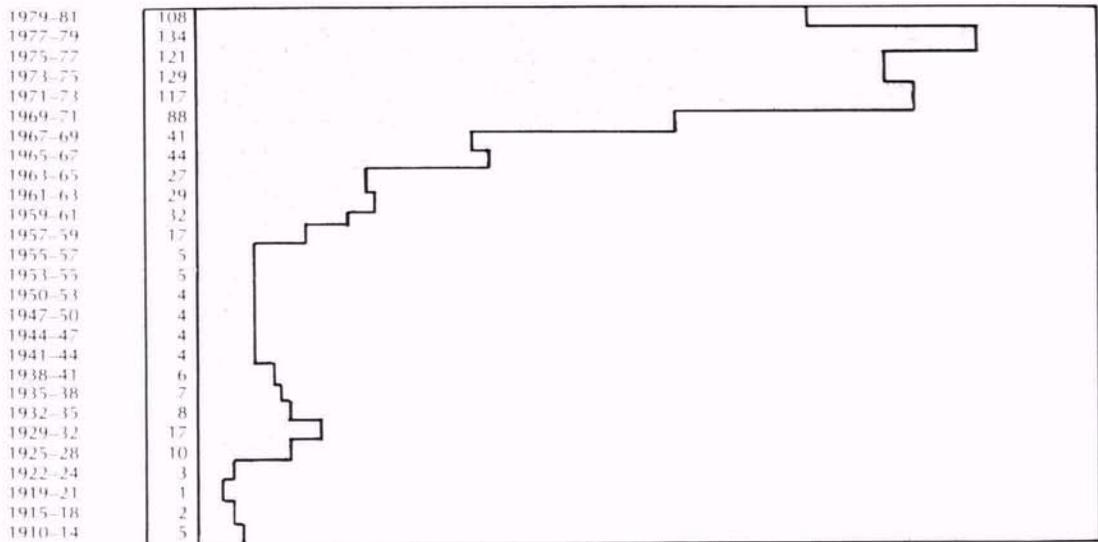


Figure 1. Average Per Year Listings in *Education Index* for Individualized Instruction and Closely Related Topics.

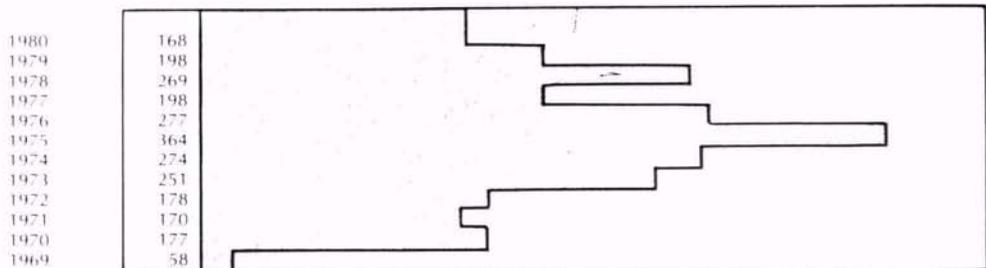


Figure 2. Number of Studies Filed with ERIC on Individualized Instruction.

Rejection of the method could have been caused by inherent difficulties as well as confusion in basic philosophy. Floyd Coppedge stated that "Basic problems in implementation have never been resolved; most schools have engaged in only token change. Examples: 1. Using teams of teachers, but not supporting the practice with differentiated staffing. 2. Using behaviorally-stated objectives with learning option limited to listening to a lecture. 3. Supporting the concept of individualized instruction but refusing to use the process of diagnosis."

Not all of the experts agreed that individualization is on the decline, but they agreed that behavioral objectives, back to basics, and competency testing have caught the attention of the public and effectively throttled development (Arthur Combs, Harriet Talmage, Galen Saylor, Jeannette Veatch).

Wrote John Goodlad, "If the responses to your questionnaire suggest a high incidence of individualization, simply don't trust your responses. One has only to crisscross the country, visit-

ing schools as I have been doing lately, to know that our schools are group-oriented institutions. Individualization is a good word, but it is little found in practice."

**"Most respondents believed the impact of individualized instruction has been positive. . . ."**

Most respondents believed the impact of individualized instruction has been positive and that schools are different today from what they were prior to the 60s. "It has caused teachers to question their accomplishments" (Postlethwait). It "created a conscience on the matter" (Goodlad). Respondents also thought schools are now more child-centered. Coppedge noted that "PL 94-142 is one example of the impact. When we wanted to do better for the special edu-

cation student, I.I. was the approach that was mandated."

Not everyone agreed that the results were all positive. Herbert Klausmeier blames "The 'pure' individualized instruction, along with permissiveness which permitted students to work on anything in which they were interested" as contributing to the back to basics, whole-class group instruction. Harold Shane also points out negative effects: "The general idea of allowing the child his individual quirks may be one of the contributors to declining test scores, back to the basics, and so on, since teachers seem to be requiring (demanding) less of students."

Many of the authorities think there will be another surge of interest in individualization in the late 80s. Goodlad writes, "We are nearing the end, I think, of one of the most depressing decades in American education."

When individualized instruction comes into vogue again, as it surely will someday, let's hope that future generations profit from past research and experimentation. ■

	Has had significant impact	Has had some influence	Little influence	Not able to evaluate	Is widely used today	Is not used by many schools
Nongraded elementary schools	5	6	4	1	3	13
Homogeneous grouping	7	6	1	2	12	1
Individualized reading	5	8	1	2	6	9
Individually Prescribed Instruction	2	9	4	1	3	11
Computer-Assisted Instruction		4	11			16
Learning centers and games	4	8	3		9	4
Student contract plan		10	7		3	13
Individually Guided Education	4	7	3		4	10
Mastery learning	3	8	5		4	11
Learning Activity Packages	2	6	3	5	4	7
PLAN (Westinghouse)	1	3	6	7		10
Boxed laboratory materials	2	6	4	4	7	5
Personalized System of Instruction (PSI)	1	6	4	5	2	9

Figure 3. Authorities Evaluate the Use of Various Individualized Approaches.

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