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INDIVIDUALIZED READING IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Introduction

It seems appropriate to begin this discussion by accepting unquestionably the fact that creativity is essential in all fields, and therefore it can and should be required in education. Laura Zirbes' very apt definition of creative teaching is the following:

Creative teaching is the sensitive, insightful developmental guidance which makes school experiences optimally educative and conducive to the development and fulfillment of creative potential in individuals and groups.¹

Common every day school experience tells us that this creative potential may be assisted, nurtured, brought to flower and fruit, or hindered and destroyed, by teacher-created conditions. This is corroborated by the opinions of many teachers

¹ Zirbes, Laura, "Creative Teaching for Creative Thinking and Living," *Educational Leadership*, October 1956, pp. 19-33.

who agree with Zirbes that a cold, impersonal human environment and rigid, fixed expectations block creativity while a warmly human environment where routines can sometimes be pushed back for human values nurtures creativity.

A second consideration is the full acceptance of principles of learning established by research and the revision of the time-honored assumptions on which education has been traditionally based.

The individualization of the teaching of reading in the elementary schools is a movement in perfect accord with creative teaching and with the acceptance of these principles established by investigation. There is almost universal agreement upon the effectiveness of individual instruction in most types of learning. If it is true that working in groups has its merits, it is also true that individual instruction is what is resorted to when learning has to be corrective, unusually thorough or rapid. Individual guidance in any aspect of learning is what the "best" families desire for their children—witness the employment of tutors. It is what the mother gives her child out of sheer love and concern for his welfare. So there can be no quarrel with the desire for individualizing or personalizing reading instruction.

A word of caution, however, is in order. Jacob warns teachers: (1) not to initiate a band-wagon movement in individualized reading for its own sake; (2) not to stereotype procedures which will later become as stilted and sterile as others which are being set aside now; and (3) not to regard individualized reading as a panacea which will cure all the evils of reading instruction.

"Individualized reading," says Jacobs, "actually ceases the moment procedures replace perceptiveness; routine supersedes reflection; things take over for thinking; custom curbs creativity."²

² Jacobs, Leland E., "Individualized Reading is Not a Thing," *Individualized Reading Practices*, Bureau of Publications, Teachers' College, Columbia University, 1958.

There are other misconceptions which must be avoided in thinking about individualized reading. It should not be looked upon as a method or a technique. Methods and techniques will have to be chosen by the teacher in accordance with each pupil's needs. What is in question is rather the creation of certain environmental conditions and attitudes on the part of the teacher and the learners which will release children to learn to read and will permit them to select their own material and to progress at their own pace. Neither can this organization of reading instruction be thought of as a laissez-faire situation in which children do much as they please. Rigorous training will have to take place if individualized reading is to be of any value.

A view of individualized reading in the elementary school

The preceding discussion has been given by way of introduction. A general picture of individualized reading in the elementary school, a composite view of the experiences reported by many teachers, and the ideas contributed by several authorities in the United States, will be attempted. Four questions are formulated and answers obtained by informally tabulating items in each of the references consulted. Below are the questions and some of the outstanding answers.

Question No. 1

What has led teachers to undertake individualized reading programs in their classrooms?

Such general responses as the following are forthcoming from elementary school teachers:

1. Children who wanted to read better.
2. Teachers who wanted to teach reading better.
3. Suggestions and encouragement from sympathetic supervisors.

4. The efforts of consultants.
5. The need to do something different.

More specifically, other teachers have stated their dissatisfaction with traditional grouping and uniformity in reading instruction based on the following:

1. Reading groups are not real groups because they do not have identical goals.
2. Grouping begets resentment.
3. Children's growth cannot be standardized.
4. Uniform reading slows down the fast readers and puts a strain on slower ones.
5. Children's problems can be detected more easily in individual treatment.
6. Reading is a private affair.
7. Each child must work at his own level of ability.

There seems to be wide acceptance of Willard Olson's idea of self-selection in development: namely, that a healthy child seeks from the environment those experiences which are consistent with his maturity and his needs. If such conditions do not exist, the human being works creatively for the conditions that advance his well-being.³ And, as one teacher expresses it in the words of Laotze, the old Chinese philosopher, "The way to do is to be."

Question No. 2

What is the function of the teacher who is involved in such a program of individualized reading instruction?

Some general answers are typical:

³ Olson, Willard, *Child Development*, New York, D. C. Heath and Company, 1949.

1. There is no right or wrong pattern of procedures.
2. There is no fixed pattern of procedures.
3. Activities emerge as the program matures.
4. Activities improve and are refined as they are repeated.
5. The teacher provides help as needed.
6. The teacher evaluates the student's work.
7. The teacher hears, encourages, and stimulates.

Other answers are more specific:

1. The teacher provides an abundance of reading material. (Three books per child seems to be a satisfactory ratio.)
2. The teacher reads and knows these books.
3. The teacher advises on choice of books and procedures when it is needed.
4. The teacher keeps a record of the books read by each child.
5. The teacher notes and records pupils' difficulties.
6. The teacher helps the child to overcome his specific difficulties.
7. The teacher uses tests, observation, anecdotal records, and other means to evaluate students' reading as to: level of difficulty, quantity, improvement in quality of material selected, improvement in skills, joy in reading, adjustment.
8. The teacher checks the reading ability level of all the members of the group at the beginning of the term.
9. The teacher provides varied activities for the members of the group to engage in while he takes special care of a number of readers every day.

10. The teacher provides practice in both silent and oral reading.
11. The teacher leads each child to make practical use of his reading.
12. The teacher detects faulty eye-movements and investigates causes.
13. The teacher provides transitional techniques for the change from group to individual instruction.
14. The teacher organizes Book Clubs, Reading Circles, and Choral Reading Activities.
15. The teacher gives exercises to increase speed of very slow readers and to adapt speed to material and purpose.
16. The teacher finds out emotional problems and helps the child to overcome them.
17. The teacher finds opportunities for success for all members of the group.
18. The teacher orients parents and older brothers and sisters on how to help the child at home.
19. The teacher tests and guides the child's critical ability.
20. The teacher guides the child's taste in reading.

Question No. 3

What does the child do in an individualized reading situation?

1. The child chooses his own books and reading selections, seeking the teacher's help if necessary.
2. The child reads at his own pace in school and at home.
3. The child lists the books he has read.

4. The child lists new words and their meanings.
5. Children read together at times, and each child has periodic reading sessions alone with the teacher.
6. The child shares his reading experiences with the group.
7. The child makes practical use of his reading.
8. The child reads to follow directions.
9. The child works out drill exercises to improve his reading skills as needed.
10. The child evaluates his own work and keeps a record of his own performance.
11. The child works independently and constructively while he is waiting for his turn to read.
12. The child reads orally for the teacher and for the class with some definite purpose in mind.
13. The child writes and gives orally questions about his reading.
14. The child reads material of increasing difficulty.
15. The child takes informal and standardized tests on reading skills.
16. The child brings books from home to read and to share with the other children.
17. The child visits and uses the school and public library.
18. The child browses and explores before choosing his reading.
19. The child recommends books to others—even to the teacher.
20. The children do artistic choral work.

Question No. 4

What outcomes may be expected from a program of individualized reading instruction?

Many of the teachers who have reported results agree on the following:

1. The outcomes are extremely favorable—very satisfactory.
2. It does away with the “caste system” of grouping.
3. Social adjustment improves.
4. An enormous amount of reading is done.
5. Teacher-pupil relations improve.
6. Children are self-motivated.
7. Pupils gain in self-confidence.
8. Troublesome children find an absorbing interest for the first time.
9. Discipline problems decrease.
10. Children experience sure, gradual success.
11. Skills are gradually developed.
12. A permanent interest in reading is created.

One teacher asserts that “even those pupils with a dual language (Puerto Rican children in New York City?) and with deprived home backgrounds and emotional difficulties are finding a modicum of success.”⁴

Another finds that “the visible progress and interest of each child is exceedingly heart-warming.”⁵

One finally sums up the situation in the following words: “Individualized reading instruction is nearer to a basic philosophy of purposeful education for the whole child.”⁶

⁴ Jenkins, Marion, “Self-Selection in Reading,” *The Reading Teacher*, 11: 84-90, December, 1957.

⁵ *Loc. cit.*

⁶ Gueney, Tess, “My Individualized Reading Program,” *Childhood Education*, 32:334-336, March, 1956.

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