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The following advantages of individualized reading are discussed: (1) a wide and varied selection of good children's literature may be used; (2) instruction may be adjusted to the child's interests, rate, skill needs, and optimal mode of perceptual learning; (3) best use of learning time is possible while all children are meaningfully engaged; (4) the individual conference provides personal interaction which has special appeal for many children; and (5) children seem to develop more favorable attitudes, so they usually read more books. The disadvantages of individualized reading include: (1) a large number of books is required; (2) some children have difficulty in self-selection; (3) there is no opportunity for readiness; (4) vocabulary, concepts, and skills are not systematically presented or repeated; (5) the teacher must be highly competent in identifying reading skills and in managing time; (6) some children require more definite structure and experience in group interaction; and (7) there is a danger that children will not read enough different types of books to broaden their literary interests. References to substantiating research are included in a 62-item bibliography. (CM)

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ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF INDIVIDUALIZED READING

Sometimes I have dizzy spells! But still I don't think I'm a menace on the highways. I get dizzy from trying to keep up with the gyrations of change in teaching. Do you ever have the same problem?

Describing the current pace of change, a writer in the April issue of Harper's refers to the "rabbit-like rate at which the new cultural 'generations' are produced in America" (17). She says that "the decade seems to have replaced the century" in framing historical epochs. Let's look back a full century rather than a decade to gain perspective on one phase of educational change.

A little more than a hundred years ago the pony express had gone out of business because the first telegraph line had reached the West Coast. People travelled mostly under the power of Old Dobbin and occasionally by boat or train; the first four-cycle internal combustion engine had just been invented, thereby making the modern automobile possible in the future. Medical men had only recently learned to use anesthetics instead of alcohol, and they were still discovering how germs cause common diseases. The schools had just completed their movement into graded organization, which was supposed

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to make teaching more efficient by assigning children to classrooms in such a way that all those in one room could be given the same lessons.

What has a hundred years of progress done for us? We now communicate by direct dialing telephones, we fly across the country in a couple of hours, and we have a schedule for placing men on the moon. We are immunized against the most common diseases and we have gone beyond open-heart surgery to at least one successful heart transplant. In our schools many teachers have learned that individuals in their classes need different types and amounts of instruction. But throughout the fifty states tens of thousands of teachers -- secondary, intermediate elementary, and even some primary teachers -- still assign the children in their rooms the same lessons at the same time in a fully graded manner. In reporting their extensive survey of reading practices, Austin and Morrison noted that ". . . visits to classrooms brought to light actual practices not advocated either by administrative personnel or in curriculum guides and of which administrators and supervisors, at all levels, may be unaware. The most prevalent is having the entire class reading from the same page of the same book at the same time" (4).

MODERN EXCELLENCE NECESSITATES DIFFERENTIATION WITHIN CLASSROOMS

Many teachers either do not know that the ranges of mental age and achievement in each room are four to seven years, or maybe they are unwilling or unable to adapt instruction to individual differences. But all serious educators long have been convinced that we can never attain excellence in education until we challenge each child to learn at the rate he is able.

Differentiated instruction pays off (33, 62), but it is not easy to provide. Some schools have tried to solve the problem the easy way by giving a teacher a class wherein

it is believed the children are all somewhat alike in capability. Study after study has shown that these administrative adjustments are of little or no value except when compared with the most unimaginative types of whole-class teaching (6, 24, 34, 48). This is true because when a number of children are grouped to be alike on one skill or set of test scores, they are almost as unlike on other skills or scores as if they had not been grouped at all (7, 12). Then we only delude ourselves if we think we can profitably teach them all together.

"Because human variability is extremely complex, the administrative structures of a school cannot provide for individual differences in reading growth; this can be done only by the teacher in the classroom. While clumsy school organization impedes the teacher's efforts, excellent organization removes the blocks to teaching-learning effectiveness by providing the flexibility teachers need in order to marshal all available resources for stimulating learning" (48). Given the freedom they must have, good teachers can organize their classes in several ways for differentiating reading teaching. One of these is the individualized reading approach.

INDIVIDUALIZED READING

For those who may not be acquainted with it, individualized reading is a teaching procedure in which each child chooses a library book, a literary reader, or possibly a basal book that he would like to read; during most of the daily reading time the youngster reads in this book at his own pace. Instruction is provided through individual pupil-teacher conferences which should be scheduled approximately twice a week, and usually last from three to ten minutes (4). During the conference the teacher discusses with the pupil a selection he has been reading, listens to his oral reading, and teaches whatever skills are currently needed for word analysis, comprehension, effective study,

etc. He leads the child to understand and appreciate qualities of good literature and tries to interest him in further reading. Some teachers occasionally bring small groups of children together on days when several seem to need to be taught the same skills. Groups may meet at other times to share stories that various members have read. Several sources are available for more complete descriptions of individualized reading (16, 29, 41, 53, 60).

ADVANTAGES OF INDIVIDUALIZED READING

There have been experimental studies on individualized reading, but the results have not always been dependable (35, 47). One gets the impression that some investigators have formed their conclusions before designing their experiments. However, by noting the trends in various studies, by giving unemotional consideration to the claims of proponents, and by reviewing some points from the psychology of learning, one can suggest the following advantages for individualized reading as a form of differentiated teaching within the classroom:

1. The reading material can be the best children's literature rather than being limited to a set of textbooks (27). No child is forced to persist in reading dull, contrived books. Although practically all of the published reading programs have included recommendations that children read extensively beyond the materials in the set or series, many schools have failed to provide the book collections that are needed, and some teachers have not known how to stimulate children to read avidly even when the books were provided.

2. Individualized reading can begin with whatever good books are available regardless of the orthography or purpose for which they were intended. In other words, one can use i.t.a. books or whatever other materials the school has on hand, and one can add to the collection or experiment with anything new that appears at any time.

3. It is possible to capitalize on the child's special interests and unique background of experiences. The youngster's strong interests can be the source of motivation for individualized reading much more so than when he must read a predetermined set of books or booklets. Likewise he can read in books that have a connection with his own cultural or community background rather than in those where comprehension requires concepts that are strange to him.

4. The child can progress at the rate which is most comfortable for him. This eliminates the waste of time that occurs when the most able learners are required to move as slowly as others in a group. It also eliminates the danger of a child's attaining an inadequate self-image as a result of constantly finding himself struggling at the bottom of a group. It has been shown that the child who sees himself as inadequate is limited accordingly in his achievement (23).

5. The teacher can make adaptations in instructional procedure to fit the child's optimal mode of perception in learning. There is some evidence to suggest that different children profit differently from various modes on visual, auditory, and kinesthetic experiences (42), and techniques for estimating the best learning modes have been offered (9, 37, 43, 52). It may be easier to diagnose these capabilities and adjust instruction to them on a one-to-one basis than in a group situation.

6. The skills program can be tailored constantly to fit each child's differing needs in reading the books he selects. The skillful teacher can learn much from questioning a child and hearing him read privately. Unfortunately, however, Austin and Morrison found that instead of having conferences with pupils two or three times a week, the teachers whom they observed sometimes were more inclined to have a conference with each pupil only once in every one to three weeks (4). It hardly seems possible to offer a complete and systematic skills program along with experiences to develop interest and

taste when direct instruction is provided for only three to ten minutes every couple of weeks.

7. The child is never asked to complete large quantities of unneeded exercises on worksheets and workbook pages merely to keep him occupied while the teacher works with other children. Some teachers who do not follow the individualized reading approach fail to remember that the best "seatwork" is reading. They often have children waste time doing practice work on skills that they already know.

8. All of the child's available learning time can be utilized instead of being wasted by his having to sit and listen while different children struggle with oral reading of the same selection. Of course it must be admitted that good teachers have learned to use other approaches also, without having the children sit in boredom.

9. The individual conference is personalized rather than mechanical -- it provides an opportunity for the development of human traits and values which are unique in the individual and which are fostered by personal interaction. Today we find ourselves in the early stages of a period of reaction against the movement toward programming learning with the aid of various mechanical and electronic devices. These programs necessarily have prearranged answers which are reinforced, with the result that originality of thought is not likely to be encouraged. The child can not identify with, empathize with, nor emulate the attitudes and character traits of a machine the way he can those of a teacher. Consequently many people fear that the child who is weaned from human interaction too soon may never be able to enjoy the fullness of life. While it may not be harmful to learn some of the simple skills through programming, it seems certain that individualized reading is a safer approach for the development of literary appreciation, creative thinking, and the sensitive qualities of humanity.

10. The individual conference has special appeal for the children. The recent first-grade study by McDonald, Harris, and Mann clearly indicates that the conference alone did not produce increased achievement as compared with group instruction, but it did seem to result in a better attitude toward reading (36). As yet nobody has assessed the psychological values that the conference may have in fulfilling the child's normal need to have somebody take a personal interest in him.

11. Children seem to develop more favorable attitudes toward reading (30, 58, 59), so they usually read more books (1, 18, 57). Several experiments have supported one or both parts of this statement. Whether this result is obtained from the novelty effect of the experiments is uncertain, because in the three-year study reported by Johnson the children in the individualized reading classes read more books than those in basal groups during the first two years, but in the third year those in basal groups read more (32).

12. It is possible, some say, to utilize the more mature pupils to instruct the less mature ones (39). This seeming advantage must be accepted with caution. Experimentation with pupil team study suggests that the recipient member of the pair learns significantly more than the teaching member (40). Regularly depriving an able pupil of time he may need to do challenging reading at his own level could leave the teacher open to the charge of exploitation. The practice of having a poorly motivated pupil tutor a younger child seems more defensible if it appears to result in improved attitudes and skills for both.

DISADVANTAGES OF INDIVIDUALIZED READING

Individualized reading has some inherent disadvantages, too:

1. It requires that a large number of books be available. It has been recommended that each class should have between one and two hundred titles at varying levels of difficulty in order to participate in individualized reading (49). Although this is viewed

as a serious budgetary problem by some (4), it is one that can be overcome without too much difficulty in this day of Federal funding. Anyway, children should have the same number of books available in order to develop reading fluency regardless of the instructional approach that is employed.

2. Children may have difficulty selecting a book of the appropriate level to stimulate progress. Individualized reading is predicated upon the principle of self-selection. But some children may select books which are too difficult and then waste time trying to read them before the teacher discovers the problem. Others may select books that are so easy they do not contribute to reading growth (4).

3. There is no opportunity to develop readiness for reading a new selection -- motivation, background information, and techniques for attacking new vocabulary. It has been commonly believed that children can read at a level approximately a grade higher after instructional preparation than without it. If this is true, there is a danger that the stimulation gained through the fine literary content of an individualized program can be offset by lack of readiness before reading. Contrariwise, it can be argued that some teachers using other programs go through the readiness step in such a slow, tedious manner that they stultify learning.

4. There is no systematic procedure for gradual introduction or repetition of the vocabulary and concepts that are being learned. In recent years criticism of the controlled vocabulary has become so popular that there almost seems to be a Counter-Control Cult. But I rarely see any members of this cult among the elementary teachers who have to teach beginning reading. As they struggle daily to help the children of average and lower capacity to master the complicated decoding system of written English, they cry for more easy-to-read materials that will aid in developing reading

vocabulary gradually while maintaining the child's interests in reading. And the number of children in our reading clinics who have certain types of comprehension problems are evidence of the need for considering the concept load in reading, too.

It is naive to assume, as some writers have, that because a child has an extensive knowledge of spoken vocabulary and English sentence patterns when he comes to school, he can suddenly learn to decode visually all that he has learned to decode auditorially through many hours of listening-speaking experience every day for six years. Practically all authors of the regularly published reading programs -- eclectic basal series, word-structure programs, and phonics programs -- carefully control some aspects of vocabulary introduction, because they have reason to believe that few teachers would find their materials useful otherwise.

The errors some teachers make are not in using materials that control vocabulary, but in failing to select materials that are interesting despite limited vocabulary, and in further failing to stimulate the more able children to move along as rapidly as they can to more challenging selections. When properly used the systematically introduced vocabulary, instead of holding the child back at immature levels, will aid him in quickly progressing to advanced levels of reading. This was demonstrated in one situation involving a continuous progress plan where reading was introduced through basal programs having controlled vocabularies and supplemented with extensive individual reading. The most competent children were able to read as many as 5000 different words by the end of the first year of instruction and nearly 10,000 by the end of the third year (48).

5. A large percentage of teachers do not have enough knowledge of the reading skills so that they can teach them without some professional guidance whenever a child needs them. Numerous studies have shown that a great many teachers are not adequately

familiar with the word-attack skills (11, 19, 20, 22, 45, 51, 54), and others have revealed that they frequently do not fully utilize the opportunities for teaching skills through individualized reading (4, 14). This would lead us to also question our competencies in the unguided teaching of skills needed for interpretive and evaluative comprehension, literary appreciation, and work-study habits. Since most of us have relied heavily on the teachers' guides when teaching basal programs, we should advise teachers of individualized reading to utilize such fine checklists of skills as those provided in Walter Barbe's book (8).

6. The conscientious teacher feels a great deal of time pressure in trying to complete profitably as many conferences as necessary in a day (15, 50). No doubt this is the reason why, as mentioned earlier, some children are involved in conferences as seldom as once in three weeks. Possibly the natural reduction of pressure in a non-experimental situation accounts for the fact that individualized reading in one district resulted in very poor progress (46).

7. There is some doubt about the adequacy and permanence of skills learnings that are developed in brief, infrequent conferences. In addition to the problems of time and teacher competence, individualized reading programs may suffer from the lack of strategically spaced review and reinforcement needed to maintain skills. Research to date gives us only partial information. Among the controlled studies comparing individualized and basal group instruction several have shown somewhat inferior achievement results for individualized reading (2, 46, 50), some have shown no significant differences (44, 57, 61), and others have favored individualized reading (1, 3, 18, 31). It must be noted that those favoring individualized reading have often been designed to give the individualized classes such special advantages as extra teaching time (18), selected or eager volunteer teachers (3), and greater accessibility to books (1). Even when efforts were made in one case to control all factors, the

comparatively higher achievement of individualized reading pupils in subjects other than reading suggested bias in teacher selection or in population sampling (32).

In her experiment Spencer overcame the skills development problems by selecting especially capable, willing teachers and giving them three weeks of inservice preparation. She also provided individualized classes with ten days of introductory word-attack skills work, a continued special program of word-attack study, and several hundred dollars worth of additional books (55). This certainly guaranteed the success of her program when compared with basal group programs not having these experimental advantages.

Because most researchers have measured only general areas of achievement, we still do not know how individualized reading develops such skills as interpretive comprehension and critical reading.

8. There is a danger that children will not read in enough different types of books to broaden their literary interests. An inspection of reading records by one research team revealed that some children limited their reading largely to one type of story (4).

9. There is little opportunity for group interaction of the type needed to develop critical thinking and to refine literary tastes. Frequently a group of students need to read the same selection, then analyze and argue in order to discover its subtleties. It is possible that without a superior teacher individualized reading may lead to only a superficial understanding of the obvious.

10. Those pupils who learn slowly often become restless and do not make good use of time. In one study it was found that the slow learners profited least from individualized reading, their major shortcoming being in vocabulary growth (50). In this, as well as in a second investigation, teachers observed that slow pupils lacked the capability to work independently as long as required between conferences (26).

11. Children from some types of backgrounds may need more definite structure in their school study. This seems to be true for both the children from disadvantaged homes and for those who have backgrounds of anxiety and compulsiveness. Youngsters from culturally deprived homes have difficulty accepting responsibility without considerable external control (5), and they seem to make greater progress in a structured basal reading program than in one based on language experiences and individualized reading (28). In a different context a study showed that highly anxious children achieved significantly less in unstructured, permissive situations than in more formal, structured classrooms (25).

12. The teacher's time and energy are quite inefficiently used. This results from attempting to teach skills lessons over and over to twenty-five or thirty-five individuals instead of teaching them to five or six groups of children who are progressing at approximately the same rates. More and more individualized reading teachers are reporting that they group children for teaching skills. Then we must question whether each individual is truly being taught each skill at the time when he really needs it. It seems doubtful that several children who are reading in entirely different books will on the same day have need for learning such skills as how to apply a particular syllabication rule, how to interpret a particular type of figurative expression, or how to detect a particular type of propaganda technique. If they are taught such skills in groups, are they involved in real individualized reading?

COMBINATION PROGRAMS

Because reading is an extremely complex process, no easy, fool-proof plan for teaching it has been or is likely to be devised. Individualized reading, like all other approaches, has its ups and downs. The beginning teacher or the one having a low energy level should be cautioned about adopting it. The highly competent, flexible teacher may find individualized reading very rewarding, and he will almost certainly succeed in it. There is mounting evidence, of course, that the teacher, rather than method or organization, is the key factor in a pupil's reading progress (24, 28, 48).

An increasing number of teachers are finding it especially worthwhile to begin with a structured program and gradually add individualized reading in various types of combinations (10, 21, 38, 49, 56). That's like having the benefit of two incomes without having to moonlight! How can you beat it!

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