

Editorial

Teaching the Individual

MOST persons with even limited experience with children and youth will agree that each differs in some measure from every other. The research data attesting to the fact are imposing and convincing. However, even if these data did not exist, the harried mother, trying to cope with the problems, desires and needs of her three or four children, would need no convincing of the unique nature of each. Nor would the elementary school teacher, facing each day 25 or 30 children and recognizing her responsibility for the learning and behavior of each, demand proof that differences exist among children.

Children Differ

Children differ in a multitude of ways. However, for purposes of reinforcing the theme of this editorial, it may be worthwhile to review briefly some of the areas of difference among children.

Perhaps the most prominent difference is that of sex. In addition to the obvious physical differences, it is generally recognized that girls, in a wide variety of ways, mature earlier than boys. For example, they mature earlier than boys in total physical development and develop an interest in the opposite sex at an age when most boys are primarily concerned with sports and outdoor life.

Though evidence exists that sex differences are sometimes overemphasized, the fact remains that such differences have real significance in the learning situation for the individual child. Girls tend to be almost a year ahead of boys in total maturity when they enter school, and most girls gain another year in maturity by the age of 13 or 14.

Children also differ in intelligence. Although much remains to be learned about the exact nature of intelligence, for practical purposes anyone dealing with children recognizes that some children react more quickly, learn more rapidly and seem to understand more thoroughly than others. Recognition that children of the same chronological age will vary widely in mental age is widespread. Acceptance of the reality that this has implications for teaching and learning is, however, less general.

Children differ in cultural background. In a nation such as the United States, made up of a wide diversity of races, nationalities and religions, cultural diversity is as real as St. Louis. The farm boy from Nebraska, the girl from Westchester, the child from the heavily industrialized Gary are culturally different and that fact has bearing on the way that they learn and the way in which they may best be taught. Religious differences, social-class differences, ethnic

differences, race differences and almost limitless combinations and mixtures of these differences affect the teaching-learning situation in almost any classroom in the United States.

Children are different in state of health, both physical and mental. This statement seems so obvious—indeed so trite—as to be hardly worth writing. And yet, what significance it has for teaching and for learning! Except in terms of understanding the individual child, how can the effect of chronic illness upon learning be assessed? Can the heartsick child from the broken home react to a classroom situation in the same way as the happy youngster from a “normal” home? Who can measure the cumulative effect of regular frustration upon a child’s readiness to learn?

It would be possible to go on for many pages detailing the differences that exist among children. However, as was stated earlier, the case hardly needs proving. Children are different and most people recognize the fact.

Putting Difference To Work

What difference does such recognition make in the teaching-learning situation in the American classroom? Unfortunately, in many—perhaps most—it makes little or no difference. Day after day, week after week in many classrooms children are “taught” as if they were all exactly alike. All receive the same assignments. All are measured by the same standards. If the teacher happens to be kind of heart, she may say, “Johnny has an I.Q. of only 90. He cannot be expected to do as well as the others. Even though he hasn’t earned it, I’ll give him a D because he tried.”

Perhaps it actually never occurred to the teacher that Johnny should not have

had the same assignments, been taught by the same methods or had his work measured by the same standards as his classmates. Or perhaps the teacher did recognize the need for dealing with Johnny differently, but drew back because “I can’t possibly prepare individual lessons for 30 children—I don’t have the time,” or “I know I should teach each child as an individual, but I don’t know how.” In any case, far too often Johnny is treated as part of a group and is lost.

There is, of course, grouping for instruction. This practice is based on the hope that if sufficient care is used and if sufficient data for selection exist, it is possible to assemble a group of children who are alike—or sufficiently so to obviate any need for varying the way the individual members of the group are taught. Groups are assembled in many ways. Children with similar intelligence quotients are grouped. Sometimes similar scores on standardized reading examinations are used as the basis for the group. Whatever is the criterion, the idea is to bring together children sufficiently alike so that they may be taught alike.

It would be unfair to condemn this practice as unworkable. Certainly grouping children according to likeness with respect to some reasonable criterion is more likely to be successful—or to be successful for more children—than is forming a group at random and treating the members as if they were all alike. However, it must be said realistically that grouping according to likeness is not the answer to the problem of dealing with the differences among children. Perhaps not as many children are lost when intelligent grouping practices are utilized, but some certainly are lost.

In the last analysis, the only answer to dealing with the individuality of a child is to teach him as an individual. Teach him as an individual with as complete a knowledge of his problems, strengths and weaknesses as it is possible to attain. There would seem to be no other solution that would assure every child an opportunity to learn in accordance with his ability and desire.

Quite obviously, to teach in this manner would involve many changes in the educational pattern. Problems of numbers of children assigned to a teacher, traditional grade level structure, and of evaluation and grading—to name only some of the more serious matters—certainly would be involved. Such changes come about by gradual evolution and not by sudden revolution. It is not likely that the schools of this year or next will abandon group teaching methods for the individualized approach.

However, progress is being made. Many elementary school teachers are teaching reading to boys and girls through the individualized approach and

are enthusiastic about the results. Many secondary teachers are attempting to adapt their teaching to the individual through assignments tailored according to the needs and abilities of each student. If study in depth of each student has not become a widespread practice at least some teachers are trying it. In short, many teachers recognize that learning takes place only within an individual and that individuals reach eagerly for those learnings that are in keeping with their individual development, disregarding whatever else is offered.

This issue of *EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP* conveys the experience and reasoning of some thoughtful people with respect to the fact of individual differences. Certainly the issue deals with one of the key problems of teaching and learning.

—EDGAR S. FARLEY, *assistant superintendent in charge of instruction, Garden City Public Schools, Garden City, New York.*

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