"Teachers on Individualization": A Review and a Response

Teachers on Individualization: The Way We Do It. ***David A. Shiman, Carmen M. Culver, and Ann Lieberman, editors.*** *New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1974. 212 pp.*

—Reviewed by TORY WESTERMARK, *Associate Professor of Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.*

This book is part of a series reporting on the five year Study of Educational Change and School Improvement conducted by the Research Division of the Institute for Development of Educational Activities, Inc. (/I/D/E/A/). Eighteen southern California schools, known as the "League of Cooperating Schools," participated in the design and testing of a new strategy for education improvement. The strategy involved the processes of dialogue, decision making, action, and evaluation through which school staff would become responsive to school problems and the possible solutions to them. This volume reports the experiences of teachers who used the resources of the League in improving their individualization of teaching and learning.

Having spent this past year, after a hiatus of 14 years, as an elementary school teacher in a two-teacher open classroom in which my colleague and I offered an alternative program emphasizing individualization of language arts, reading, and mathematics for grades four, five, and six, I looked forward with interest and enthusiasm to reading *Teachers on Individualization: The Way We Do It.*

My interest and enthusiasm were short-lived. The book was written for new teachers and experienced teachers who are eager to change or are looking for an approach to individualization. It is unlikely that any of the book's intended audience will gain much from it.

In the description of any elementary school program, one would expect to find some indication of the instructional objectives related to the scope of skills that students are expected to master. In this volume, statements of instructional objectives are either absent or, where indicated to be present, reveal the authors' unfamiliarity with the components of instructional objectives. An objective such as: "To help develop comprehension" does not provide the reader with any assurance that the author is aware of the numerous skills comprising comprehension, or that the author has any adequate means to evaluate it. This lack of statements of objectives would indicate that the teachers were either ignorant of or unconcerned about the direction of the programs and the intended learning outcomes.

Another serious weakness in the descriptions of the programs is the lack of adequate procedures for assessment, in the various subject areas, of the pupils' entering behavior. If one is purporting to individualize instruction, it is imperative that a thorough analysis be made of each student's needs in the different subject areas so that the teacher can plan instruction according to those needs. In reading, for example, the reported use of such instruments as the *Wide Range Achievement Test* or an unnamed standardized test that measures vocabulary, comprehension, speed-accuracy (presumably the *Gates Reading Survey*), which are achievement rather than diagnostic tests, suggests the authors' lack of familiarity with the great variety of more appropriate reading tests.

I had expected to find some application and critical evaluation of the criterion reference test now available in reading and mathematics. It is impossible to understand how pupil needs are met if the needs are unidentified. One could accept the lack of instructional objectives and

the limited diagnosis if the instructional programs described were exemplary. However, the descriptions of the instructional component of the programs are equally disappointing. In reference to reading programs one teacher states: "Our reading program was based on books chosen from the public library every twenty-one days, each child taking out and trying to read a total of six books during that period"; while another states: ". . . the plan of having each child select his own textbook and proceed through at his own rate constitutes a large portion of our program." These and other statements reveal a complete lack of understanding of what constitutes a developmental reading program. The descriptions of the programs in other areas do not reflect an awareness or understanding of current approaches, materials, and resources.

The tasks of diagnosis, prescription, and evaluation are fundamental to individualization. The consequences of these tasks determine the organization of time and space usage. The space usage is unique to each situation and planned with full knowledge of the equipment and materials available to facilitate the implementation of a program. The pages devoted to furniture arrangement and advice "to place equipment using electrical power near an electrical outlet" might well have been more advantageously used for a thorough consideration of the major tasks essential to individualization.

The book is a disappointment. The one redeeming feature is the valuable "Bibliography on Individualizing Instruction." The programs described seem to be analogous to correspondence courses offered to children in remote areas and are reminiscent of my own educational experiences in a one-room rural school. □

A response to Westermark's review

—by M. Frances Klein, *Associate Professor of Education, Pepperdine University, Los Angeles, and Curriculum Researcher, /I/D/E/A/, Los Angeles.*

The review by Westermark indicates that he had some very firm expectations about what books on individualization should include before he began to read this volume. These include discussions of instructional objectives related to the scope of skills to be mastered, procedures for assessing pupils' entering behaviors, diagnosis and prescription, exemplary instructional programs, and resources on individualization. Anyone concerned with individualization of instruction would have some of the same expectations.

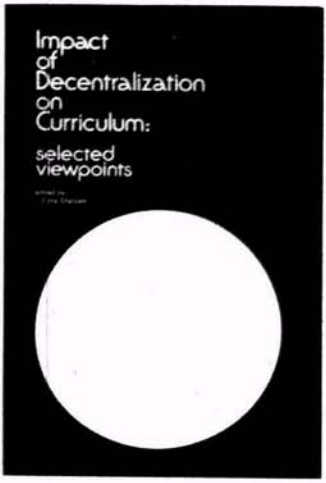
I agree that the book does not adequately deal with these expectations: sometimes behavioral objectives are not very well stated according to commonly used criteria; it does not contain all of the ideas, procedures, and resources which I believe will be needed to adequately individualize education—not just instruction. Obviously the volume must be supplemented by other writings in order to receive a comprehensive view of individualization (as would most books on any given topic.)

There are some criticisms made by Westermark, however, that I do not agree with. For example, he objects to the lack of adequate procedures for assessing the entering behavior of pupils in the various subject areas. This topic does receive explicit attention from the teachers. Techniques of diagnosis and prescription are discussed on a broad, though not specific, level and are not restricted to use only in a sequence of reading or math skills. Rather, teachers report diagnosis occurring in speaking, writing, socializing, expressing empathy, in original thinking, common sense, sense of worth, and ability to take responsibility (p. 16). To diagnose and be concerned about students' growth in these areas as well as the more traditional skills reflect a refreshing and more comprehensive view of individualization than is often suggested in much of the literature.

Another criticism by Westermark had to do with the absence of or inadequate statements of behavioral objectives. I have already indicated that behavioral objectives were not always well stated in terms of commonly used criteria, but I do not believe they were absent in the book. In my opinion, there was clearly an explicit and an implicit concern for behavioral objectives. A number of these were reported specifically on pages 36 and 37. It may well be that the form the statements take does not meet the criteria Westermark would use. However, the form to be used in stating objectives—if they are to be planned at all—is a major issue within the field of curriculum. What is well stated to one curriculum specialist may be inadequate to another. In spite of Westermark's objection to the term, Bloom has carefully defined what is meant by "comprehension" and gives suggestions as to how the cognitive ability can be evaluated.[1] For Westermark to object to the use of the term suggests that he may be unaware of the major work often used in stating and evaluating growth toward achieving objectives.

Westermark apparently did not consider what the book may have to offer to teachers (the prime audience for whom the book was intended) as well as other educators interested in individualization: descriptions of very prac-

[1] Benjamin S. Bloom, editor. *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Cognitive Domain.* New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1956.



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tical procedures and ideas used by a variety of classroom teachers and detailed reporting of the problems and successes the teachers encountered as they proceeded to individualize their educational programs. In doing this, the editors and teachers describe an implementation of individualization which has considerable sophistication. For example, the teachers report using groups as needed and thus do not conceive of individualization as instructing all students in need of the same skill individually. Although this is a common interpretation of individualization, it is a very inefficient method of instruction.

They also clearly do not expect materials to conduct most of the instruction, another common approach to individualization, but most chapters emphasize the need for many rich and varied resources which are drawn upon as needed. The teachers talk about using commercial materials (a potential and commonly used source for reading and math skills sequences), teacher-made materials, district-produced materials, and student-made materials. They report going on field trips, using games, public libraries, peers as resources, audiovisual materials, and resource people from the community. These resources reflect a considerable degree of sophistication about what is needed for individualization of instruction as well as for good education in general.

A basic goal accepted by all of the teachers reporting in this volume was that each child can become a self-directed learner. It was refreshing to me that a broad definition of individualization was chosen and implemented rather than the more typical, but narrow, definition of progression through a predetermined sequence of skills in a subject area—usually restricted to language arts, reading, and math.

The book also describes the attention which the teachers paid to a number of dimensions involved in individualization which sometimes are overlooked in other writings on the topic. The use of time, space, materials, and classroom management techniques are basic elements which can significantly affect the success of any attempt to individualize. These elements of individualization might not be assigned the same weight or value as those named by Westermark by educators of various persuasions, but they are certainly basic considerations to be carefully analyzed and planned for by teachers and will be extremely useful to the teacher who needs practical help in getting started.

The book makes contributions which should not be overlooked by the reader. I believe that the programs described in the book are in no way "analogous to correspondence courses offered to children in remote areas" or ". . . experiences in a one-room rural school." Instead, I believe the descriptions of programs *do* indicate an awareness and an understanding of current approaches, resources, and materials. The chapters describe new roles to be taken on by teachers which will be attractive to and desired by many. They report a quality of life in the classrooms which is challenging and exciting. Students have some meaningful control over their education; they have choices they can make in terms of the goals they will pursue, what they will learn, what materials they will use, and how they will use the time and space available to them. Classrooms are viewed in terms of "we-ness" rather than as teacher versus students. Some sound advice is given to teachers who read the book: be flexible, go slowly, and provide a variety of options. Westermark and I agree that the bibliography included is an invaluable resource.

To me, the book was *not* a disappointment. I believe that the editors and authors accomplished well what they stated they intended to do. Furthermore, they did it in a professionally competent way and in an easily readable style. I would recommend that the book be carefully read and studied by any teacher or other educator interested in implementing an individualized program. □

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