Reviews

Individual Differences and the Common Curriculum: 82nd Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education

Gary D. Fenstermacher and John I. Goodlad, editors
Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1983

—Reviewed by William Shubert, University of Illinois, Chicago

"Not these old curricular songs again?" This was my initial response to seeing the two key terms used in the title of this 1983 NSSE Yearbook: *individual differences* and *common curriculum*. With a closer look, however, I became more intrigued. In fact, I began to consider the possibility that the least noticeable term in the title may be the most important: *and*.

And makes all the difference here; it conjoins two terms representing two major ideas that have almost always been linked with *or* in educational discourse. Proponents of common curricula (be it liberal arts, basics, or nationalistic propaganda) are almost invariably seen in opposition to advocates of attention to the individual (be they humanistic psychologists, open educators, or progressive educators). This book moves beyond such either-or thinking to forge a useful synthesis.

The masterful organization of the book contributes as much as the substance of the arguments advanced. *Individual Differences and the Common Curriculum* begins with an overview by Gary Fenstermacher, who asserts that grouping of students is not merely an instrument of organization or curricular delivery, but a curricular and instructional variation in its own right. The knowledge, skills, and ideas taught to one group are in fact qualitatively different from those taught to another group. Thus, students do not have equal access to what John Dewey labeled "the funded capital of civilization"; they have unequal opportunity to become well-educated humans.

The seriousness of this problem is brought into focus by the question Goodlad and Fenstermacher framed for the chapter authors: "Do we know enough about differences between or among individuals to entertain, in a practical way, the possibility of providing most learners with a common curriculum, adapted to account for individual differences but without compromising their chances for a rational, moral, and authentic life?"

In Part One, four authors address the nature of individual differences from four very different disciplinary perspectives. Thomas L. Good and Deborah J. Stipek write from a psychological perspective and draw upon empirical research on teaching, adaptive education, ability differences, cognitive styles, and classroom diversity. They conclude that educational policymakers must allow increased flexibility of expression for teachers and students. A sociological basis for individual differences is provided by Thomas Popkewitz, who guides readers through a brief historical excursion into the effect of culture and politics on individuals and thus on education. He then applies these concepts to an analysis of three different variations within Individually Guided Education school reform. Through this analysis, Popkewitz reveals that in the varied responses of schools to an educational reform, we can "foreshadow fundamental points of tension and change in our society."

Louis Fischer and Gail Paulus Sorenson treat legal bases of individualization, noting that it is primarily the unusual situation regarding individual differences that enters deliberation within the legal structure. They point out that most school activities and problems that accrue from them are best resolved outside the courts. Therefore, educators should accept professional responsibility to act decisively and not wait for the courts to provide answers to most difficult questions of curriculum policy.

While Part One provides a look at individual differences through the lenses of four disciplines that are the basis for common curriculum, Part Two focuses on the common curriculum derived from each of five disciplines. The latter enables the reader to realize the power of disciplinary unity to foster variety, and thereby shows the disciplines of knowledge to be seedbeds of individuality. As fundamental tenets of a discipline are more deeply probed, the authors demonstrate that potential for variability is increased in several ways. The perspective of greater knowledge yields awareness of more possibilities for decision and action, interdependence among disciplines, and the relevance of knowledge to life's problems.

Part Three of the book consists of two articles that develop practical and policy applications of the foregoing. In the first of these, Michael W. Kirst responds from a political and economic perspective, calling for both improved macro-curricular policy or generalizable strategies and micro-curricular policy-revitalized local curriculum policymaking. In the concluding chapter, Goodlad argues for a symbiotic relation between attention to individual differences and the common curriculum, noting that humanization and democratization of knowledge evolve together. He suggests that more democratic and humanistic education can be provided by smaller schooling units governed by a sense of community rather than the rampant alienation so prevalent in too many large schools today.

This is an important book for practitioners and scholars alike. It raises more questions than it answers, but the art of raising fundamental questions is indeed a worthy contribution. At the heart of this book lies a call for greater understanding for what teachers and students do, and within its pages we find an array of possibilities for gaining insight into the reciprocal relation between the common curriculum and individual needs and interests. If there is one message here that stands out above the rest, it is the subtle but powerful implication that teachers and students must be central figures in curricular and instructional policy, not merely as implementors or token members of planning committees but as active creators of policy in the process of transacting with each other. *Individual Differences and the Common Curriculum* is a book that should be read and pondered by those who analyze and create educational policy.

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