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Ronald G. Noland
Auburn University

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MEETING INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN READING

Ronald G. Noland

AUBURN UNIVERSITY

Perhaps the most complex as well as the most important task confronting the teacher is adjusting instruction to meet the individual differences of students in activities related to reading. It is an ever-present problem at all grade levels. For effective progress in learning to read, the teacher must organize the class and instructional procedures so that each child has the opportunity to achieve up to his capacity, albeit it is not his grade level.

One consistent trend in American education has been toward greater and greater individualization of instruction in all areas of the curriculum. Historically, the trend has moved from whole class instruction to the instruction of smaller groups of children. Supporting this trend is an increasing awareness of individual differences based on the recognition that individuals learn at different rates, and that their interests and purposes play an important part in bringing about an attitude which makes teaching more effective. Teachers and educational psychologists have discovered that when the learner is deeply involved in the selection of the specific learning task, instruction is but a logical continuation of this trend.

The history of reading has been a struggle to provide for the individual differences in children. The use of basals and the practice of in-class grouping was developed from this idea. However, these cannot alone provide for the vast array of individual differences unless used in the most beneficial manner.

Current research reveals that approximately 95% of classroom teachers use basal materials in teaching reading. A misuse of the basal program occurs when the same grade-level basal is used for the entire class. Many teachers have supplemented the basal reader by providing opportunities for pupils to read widely in many books.

Whatever the approach the teacher employs—basal, individualized, linguistic, language experience, or others—it is difficult to provide instruction in the reading skills in a form tailored to the strengths and weaknesses of each individual pupil.

Efficient teaching of reading requires that the teacher be able to plan and carry out a program in which children with widely varying abilities can be effectively guided to achieve the goals of reading instruction in accordance with their individual learning capacities.

The aim of the teacher should be to help every pupil to develop his maximum power in reading by planning a program with a variety of material to meet his needs. There is a constant need for a balanced program involving some whole class reading (sharing) activities, and some individualized reading.

Standardized tests, informal inventories, and teacher-made tests can be employed in order to secure quantitative measures of individual abilities and needs along with other less formal appraisals. The proficiency profile or pattern of achievement, abilities, and personality derived from these tests and the teacher's observations, indicate strengths and weaknesses of the individual and supply the basic information for adjusting instruction to meet a child's need.

It is generally known that any given child shows a considerable range of differences in the degree to which he masters the essential reading skills. Therefore, it is necessary for the teacher to ascertain certain information related to reading through formal and informal testing, observation, and record keeping. Some of these include: (1) word recognition skills, (2) growth in vocabulary knowledge and concepts and other basic comprehension abilities, (3) comprehension and study skills, (4) level of reading achievement, (5) interests, and (6) patterns of achievement.

The "individualized approach" is a method of teaching reading that is used by many teachers to provide for individual differences. Practices usually included in an individualized reading program are self-selection of materials by pupils, self-pacing in reading, individual pupil conferences with the teacher, and emphasis on record-keeping by the student and teacher. The principle underlying the policy of self-selection assumes that a class of different needs and interests cannot be met by a single basal series nor textbook and that materials of varying degrees of difficulty and interests must be available for the student. Teacher-pupil conferences provide the teacher with an opportunity to evaluate the child's progress, as the child progresses to higher levels of understanding and appreciation. Also, for many pupils, the teacher's positive response to their reading is a stronger motivation than the actual act of reading itself. While the teacher is having a conference, the rest of the class should be involved in skill development activities, recreational reading, reading in curricular areas, and creative activities.

A variety of trade books should be available in the classroom for self-selection, as well as magazines, newspapers, and various reading program kits. Films, filmstrips, tapes, recordings, and such provide

more materials for a diversified reading program for individuals.

The chief objectives for meeting individual needs are categorized as follows:

First, there is the objective of providing myriad opportunities for the maximum growth of each child in the important phases of reading. A plan that is concerned only with developmental reading is too limited in scope; recreational reading and functional reading must also be given careful consideration.

Secondly, a sound plan for reading instruction must necessarily be one that favors the social and personal adjustment of all of the children and helps to foster the development of truly democratic attitudes and practices. A sound plan should be acceptable to administrators, teachers, pupils, and parents. It should be one in which children are helped to become happier and more secure, as well as becoming increasingly sufficient in reading skills. The plan should assist in the development of life-long readers.

Thirdly, the plan should be one which can be carried out by teachers with training and creative ability. The teacher must be willing to devote time and energy for planning and preparation. A good plan should fit the school and its pupils. Each school must appraise its own situation and work out solutions that fit its own needs.

In conclusion, a competent teacher will be aware of the individual differences in reading, will identify the nature and extent of the differences, and will meet them by planning a program geared to meet each child's needs. Indeed, skillful teaching of reading implies a positive attitude towards individual differences in which instruction will seize upon and cultivate each pupil's potentialities.