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Individualized Reading—A Revisit and Review

By Irene Allen and Richard Thompson

If you are in a rut, you need a lift. If you are tired or dispirited using a basal reader approach to teach reading, why not kick the habit? One way to do this is to try individualized reading. If you enjoy your rut, perhaps you should remember the only difference between a rut and a grave is the distance. If you feel in need of a stimulant, why not read further? You may climb upward and guide your students along, too.

Individualized reading, as an approach to the teaching of reading, has stimulated much discussion and controversy since it came into prominence at the turn of the century. It was developed by a teacher for her classroom based on her students' needs and her understanding of the reading process. Much of the misunderstandings come from disagreements concerning certain aspects of this approach.

The following question-and-answer format was developed in order to give you a better understanding of the individualized approach and to encourage more thinking along the lines of individualized instruction.

What Is Individualized Reading?

Essentially, individualized reading is an approach which utilizes the interests of the pupils and permits them to select their own reading material, allowing them to read independently instead of in organized groups. In choosing their own books, the pupils have different books as opposed to all pupils having the same lesson at the same time. Reading is not considered a separate subject, but is considered a process to be used in all learning situations. The philosophy underlying this approach is directed toward self-evaluation and self-growth.

Crosby (2) states that individual-

ized reading differs from traditional programs because the children read different books, receive different instruction from their teacher, select their own reading material and are grouped at irregular intervals for specific skill instruction.

This approach is not a commercially prepared kit of books. It is a way of learning based on interests and needs of each pupil utilizing books and materials that were self-selected.

What Are the Advantages And Disadvantages Of Individualized Reading?

Children do more reading because they are able to self-pace themselves. Selfselection of material meets the interests of the students, and the reading material level of difficulty tends to match the child's reading ability level. Individualized reading avoids the possibility of stigmatization sometimes unavoidable when reading groups are formed on the basis of reading ability. Individual conferences insure individualized attention for each student. Individualized reading, then, is likely to meet the needs and interests of all pupils regardless of their reading level.

Besides advantages there are some disadvantages to individual reading. One weakness is that skills are not systematically taught except when the teacher provides instruction during individual conferences or sets up groups for sequential skill instruction. Without considerable thought, planning, and skill on the part of the teacher, these skills may be unlearned or underdeveloped. Without question, keeping track of each pupil's progress and sequentially programming skill needing instruction, requires managerial competence coupled with systematic record keeping. Not all

teachers are capable of handling this. For these potential problems to be minimized or eliminated, the teacher contemplating immersion of her students into individualized reading must plan carefully and in advance.

Why Use Individualized Reading?

The logic of individualized reading instruction rests on the premise that the use of reading materials only with maximum ranges of readability levels will meet the divergent reading range of any group of students.

As Austin (1) states, on the first day of school we can expect a four-year range of mental maturity among the children. The longer the pupils are in school the wider the range becomes. By the seventh grade, the range is from third to eleventh grade.

You can expect the range of reading abilities within a class to be at the very least approximately two-thirds of the mean chronological age of the pupils in the class. If the average age is eight the range may be five years, while among twelve-year-olds there is usually an eight-year spread or more between the best and the poorest reader (1). Therefore, individualized reading seems to be the most logical approach in meeting such diverse differences.

For What Grade Level Can Individualized Reading Be Successfully Used?

Individualized reading can be achieved at any level. Most schools use it above first grade, but some teachers have found it successful in first grade. Warford (13), Spencer (8,9), Johnson (4,5), and many others have compared individualized reading at various grade levels with other approaches, but mainly the basal reader approach. The evidence seems to indicate that individualized reading is equal to or superior to the approaches with which it is compared at any level. The

implication is evident. A teacher who uses individualized reading will not likely curtail the reading power of her students; quite the contrary, she will more than likely get better results or at least comparable achievement gains.

How Should You Get Ready?

The teacher should get a variety of books, five or more for each child, that will meet the reading abilities and interests of the class members. To meet the independent reading level of most of your students, approximately two-thirds of the books should have a readability level below your grade level. Set up a notebook with a page for each child to record events of individualized conferences. Read available materials on individualization and adapt it to your students needs. Veatch's (11) book is a classic on this approach.

It is helpful and informative to give group diagnostic tests and/or an Individual Reading Inventory to each child to determine his instructional level and to know in what skill areas he needs help. The Bond-Ballow-Hoyt *Diagnostic Reading Tests* or *The Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test* are good examples of group tests to use. Analysis of the data collected will help you understand the strengths and weaknesses of each of your students. This information is necessary regardless of the reading approach you use.

It takes a creative and flexible teacher to do these things well. She must be cognizant of the sequential development of skills and recognize when the optimum time arises to present particular skills to the pupils.

What Is Your Role In The Individualized Reading Program?

Your role would be primarily that of consultant and resource person to your students, a manager of the classroom environment, and a supplier of materials. You would help pupils

learn to plan, evaluate, and consider alternatives. You would provide students with ego support, give first aid when needed, and facilitate the learning environment so that students might direct their own learning.

You would meet the children individually or in groups for evaluation, ascertaining needs, and teaching skills when they were needed. You would guide children so they could grow creatively and learn at an exhilarating pace.

The success of your program will depend upon your diagnostic abilities in identifying children's needs in the areas of reading skills, selection of materials and in your ability to evaluate the pupil's progress.

How Does The Child Select An Appropriate Book For Individualized Reading?

Care must be taken to insure that each child is selecting books on his independent reading level. Veatch (11) says, by "Rule of Thumb", have the child choose a book on a topic he likes and have him open the book near the middle to a page with many words on it. Ask him to read it silently and when he comes to a word he doesn't know, he should put his thumb on the table. If he meets another he doesn't know he puts down his next finger, and so on. If he uses up all the fingers on one hand, that book is too hard for him. He should put it back and choose another one. The child's independent reading level is his instructional level.

Dolch (3) says that ideally, the child should not miss more than three words per page. If the books chosen are too hard, skipping will inevitably result and wrong habits will be cultivated.

The books should suit the purposes of each child either for his own enjoyment or for specific purposes worked out during a conference. Motivation results from meeting needs, interests or both.

Can Group Activity Be Utilized In The Individualized Reading Program?

Yes! According to Vite (12) and your authors, individual reading and not place limitations on good group experiences. There are many wholesome, meaningful, sociable, enjoyable and fruitful group experiences inherent in such programs. Some types of grouping suggested are: grouping for conference, social purposes, spontaneous social grouping, grouping for audience reading, grouping for special interests, and grouping for skill needs. If more than one student needs to learn a skill, grouping is logical.

As Wilson (14) says, "Grouping makes sense only in terms of immediate purpose in an individualized approach, as in bringing a small group together to teach a certain skill."

How Much Time Should Be Devoted To Individual Conferences With Pupils? How Do You Know What Is Going On And Keep Track Of It?

You have student-teacher conferences lasting as little as three to five minutes daily, ten minutes a week, or more if the pupil needs more help. Spache (6) recommends two to four conferences per child per week. Some teachers meet this situation by making a schedule which insures that all pupils will have conferences in turn. Others offer a schedule sheet on which children may write their names when they feel the need for a conference or wish to report on a book they have read. A combination of these types of schedules may be more effective to meet the needs of the children.

You cannot keep everything in your head; so you need to keep simple records. If the teacher follows Spache's (6) suggestions, she will collect five basic types of records for each child. These may be placed in a notebook a card file, or a folder. The first records include the facts acquired

from the school's cumulative record-keeping system. These should include the child's age, I.Q., mental age, reading interests, and scores from recent standardized and informal reading tests. A record of the child's instructional, independent, and potential reading levels will be obtained during the initial inventory conference or from initial testing. A third record will be that of his oral reading behaviors. A fourth record will contain an analysis of the pupil's oral reading errors as observed during the inventory conference and several subsequent conferences during which the child reads orally. The final set of records will include those notes that each teacher deems adequate for judging and guiding the progress of the pupils. These may include such items as titles of books read, degree of any type of comprehension shown, child's reaction to the book, plans for sharing his selections and the like.

On reporting to the teacher the child's record should include only the name of the book, the author, a brief comment and sometimes a notation about the size or length of the book. To truly individualize, each teacher, in cooperation with her students, must set up records that are informative yet simple to avoid consuming unnecessary time and energy.

Summary

If you are still with us, you now realize that we have reviewed much information concerning individualized reading. We have described what it is, its advantages and disadvantages, why it meets pupil needs, how you can get ready, and how you can run an individualized reading program. If you feel some eagerness, move forward and upward by trying this exciting

approach to teaching reading. Should you discern no enthusiasm, release your finger grips and fall back into your rut. We are sorry to have bothered you.

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