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# Meeting Individual Differences Through a Skills File

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# MEETING INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES
# THROUGH A SKILLS FILE

by Leo M. Schell

Historically and perennially teachers are exhorted and admonished to "Meet Individual Differences!" Unfortunately, the exhorter/admonisher typically fails to specify precisely how this can be accomplished. In teaching reading, those 29 bundles of energy are at varied levels of achievement in such widely diverse skills as phonics, context clues, dictionary usage, and reading-study skills. The same basal reader and workbook for each child - even those within a reading group, is wholly insufficient, even for a teacher with limitless time, energy, knowledge, and ditto masters!

Dividing the pupils into three, four, or even five reading groups will not alone insure satisfactory attention to individual strengths and weaknesses in reading skills. Woestehoff (1969) concluded that "there is little justification for the assumption that a given level of general reading ability will necessarily be accompanied by an equivalent level of competency in specific reading sub-skills." She felt her findings lent "emphasis to the belief that if children are to develop optimum reading ability, their instruction must not be determined by a process of inference, but rather through a careful diagnosis of their specific sub-skill needs. As difficult as it may be, from an instructional standpoint it becomes vital to consider specific learnings rather than a generalized ability." Teachers must know the individual needs of pupils and occasionally group for skills instruction - as well as grouping for **reading** instruction.

This discussion will not describe how to discover these skill needs. It is assumed that teachers know how to use available diagnostic tests, can find patterns in repeated oral reading errors, can analyze performances on practice materials, and/or have access to specialized diagnostic personnel. It tells what to do once these skill needs have been discovered.

A primitive skills file is nothing more than pages torn from various grade level skills books (a 1970 euphemism for "workbooks") which are grouped according to skills -and filed sequentially - in a file cabinet, wooden box, or cardboard container - by grade level. When a teacher discovers that Johnny needs additional practice with medial vowel sounds (or use of guide words or notetaking), she can merely go to the file, pull out one or more skills sheets at the correct level of difficulty and assign them to Johnny. Admittedly this won't guarantee that Johnny will thereby automatically improve his mastery of medial vowel sounds; teacher **"teaching"** is usually essential also. But with a skills file, at least the teacher has something to teach with and from at her fingertips. With a skills file, there is no excuse that appropriate practice materials are lacking.

And Gilliland (1965 p. 97) points out that when several different kinds of skills books are available, most

teachers make little or poor use of them because they don't have the time to find the pages that would meet the needs of each student and they have no way of keeping track of exactly what exercises are available in each book. But when these same skills books are converted into skills files, they are used much more effectively and frequently.

Commercial and teacher-made dittoed skills sheets can be mounted on oak tag so they can be used repeatedly. And if pupils cover them with acetate and use a grease pencil for writing, prolonged use is possible. Each sheet can be labeled (or coded) for convenient use with the following information: reading level, skill, worksheet number. And they can be made self-checking either by pasting an answer sheet on the back of the oak tag or by having an answer sheet in a separate folder. Not only can they be self-checking, they can also be self-directing. For example, a note at the bottom of the answer sheet can say, "If you made 3 or more errors, do the next sheet in this series. If you made only 1 or 2 errors, see me." And there should be multiple copies of each worksheet so several pupils can work simultaneously in a group on the same skill.

One beauty of skills files is their ease of expansion and elaboration. Teacher aides or volunteer parents can readily mount and label pages, make answer sheets, or even make ditto masters. And an ambitious teacher can easily find ways to include learning activities other than worksheets in a skills file. Games, devices, transparencies, and even filmstrips and audio tapes can be prescribed and used individually or in small groups without teacher supervision. And a group of teachers at a single grade level could cooperate to establish a central file which they all could use. Obviously, this could be extended to several grade levels, a wing of a school, or even to the whole school. In the latter case, the file could be housed in the instructional materials center. (The same advantages and disadvantages exist for room vs. central skills files as do for room vs. central school libraries. Obviously, materials in both locations is desirable and a satisfactory arrangement is easy to work out.)

To provide for individual differences in all the varied reading skills, it is crucial that differentiated practice material exist. Macmillan has tried to do this somewhat with their *Spectrum of Skills* (Weinberg, 1964), Houghton Mifflin has applied it to several skill areas in their *Reading Skills Lab* (Durr, 1968) and Harcourt, Brace and World has organized phonics materials this way (Durrell, 1968). But commercial material is only a drop in the bucket; teacher initiative in establishing skills files would be a major breakthrough toward making individualized instruction a reality.

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