Criteria of Individualized Education

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For several decades we have had much lip-service to the ideal of individualized education, and while it is happily true that much progress has been made in isolated schools, it is also unhappily true that in the great majority of schools and colleges the prescriptive curriculum, with its correlative uniform mass standards, still reigns supreme and almost unchallenged. Most of our educational resources, procedures, and efforts are still organized around, and directed toward, a predetermined pattern of subjects prescribed by committees whose members appear to be oblivious of the fact and the implications of individual differences. The difficulty of accepting the Copernician theory in the seventeenth century seems to have been small in comparison with the current difficulty of accepting in practice the theory that neither curricula nor standards have any validity or defense except as they are constructively related to the actual abilities, interests, and needs of growing individuals who must live in society as well as in our schools.

While the theory of individual differences as an explicit psychological doctrine is relatively recent, the theory of differential education is both ancient and respectable. Plato's statement of the case astonishes us, not because of its fundamental soundness, but because it is so generally ignored by those who are supposed to be specially qualified to teach Plato's philosophy in our colleges and teacher-training schools. It is not unusual to find pupils in college philosophy classes who are barely literate and who will never get far beyond mere literacy and the virtues of unreasoning and therefore unswerving football allegiance. It is hard to be impatient with the un-Platonic attitudes of such college students, when we are so patient with their teachers who so frequently violate Plato's most fundamental educational doctrine.

II

Nearly twenty centuries after Plato, a great English philosopher and teacher gave us a statement which summarizes the fundamental ideal of the modern testing, guidance, and counseling movement. John Locke says in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* published in 1695:

> He, therefore, that is about children, should well study their natures and aptitudes, and see, by often trials, what turn they easily take, and what becomes them; observe what their native stock is, how it may be improved, and what it is fit for: He should consider, what they want; whether they be capable of having it wrought into them by industry, and incorporated there by practice; and whether it be worthwhile to endeavor it. For in many cases, all that we can do, or should aim at, is to make the best of what nature has given; to prevent the vices and faults to which such a constitution is most inclined, and give it all the advantages it is capable of. Everyone's natural genius should be carried as far as it could, but to attempt the putting another upon him, will be but labor in vain: and what is so plaister'd on, will at best fit but untowardly, and have always hanging to it the ungracefulness of constraint and affectation.

Skipping two more centuries, and crossing the Atlantic to our own shores, we find equally wise statements from some of our greatest educational thinkers which have been as much ignored as those of Plato and John Locke. Speaking at the NEA meetings in 1892, in Brooklyn and Saratoga, New York, Charles W. Eliot, then President of Harvard University, made the following statements:

1. "To descriminate among pupils of different capacity, to select the competent for suitable instruction, and to advance each pupil with appropriate rapidity, will ultimately become, I believe, the most important functions of the public-school administrator—those functions in which he or she will be most serviceable to families and to the state."

2. "Another objection to the changes proposed often takes this form: they are said to be aristocratic in tendency. The democratic theory, it is said, implies equality among the children, uniformity of programme, uniform tests for promotion, and no divisions in the same schoolroom according to capacity or merit. I need not say to this audience that these conceptions of true democracy in schools are fallacious and ruinous. Democratic society does not undertake to fly in the face of nature by asserting that all children are alike and should be treated alike. Everybody knows that children are infinitely diverse—that children in the same family, even, are apt to be very different in disposition, temperament, and mental power. Every child is a unique personality. It follows, of course, that uniform programmes and uniform methods of instruction, applied simultaneously to large numbers of children, must be unwise and injurious—an evil always to be struggled against and reformed, so far as the material resources of democratic society will permit. It is for the interest of society, as well as of the individual, that every individual child's peculiar gifts and powers should be developed and trained to the highest degree. Hence, in the public schools of a democracy the aim should be to give the utmost possible amount of individual instruction, to grade according to capacity just as far as the number of teachers and their strength and skill will permit, and to promote pupils, not by battalions, but in the most irregular and individual way possible. A few days ago I heard an assistant superintendent in an important city declare that many school teachers in his city objected to any division among fifty or more pupils in each room—any division, that is, according to the attainments and powers of the individual pupils. They wanted all the pupils in a given room to be in one grade, to move together like soldiers on parade, and to arrive at examination day, having all performed precisely the same tasks, and made the same progress, in the same subjects."

3. Flexible curriculum and standards must be adapted so that each type of pupil may receive the best education of which he is capable, "whatever the grade of that education may be. Accessibility of appropriate opportunity is the essence of democratic society. Not equality of gifts, attainments, or powers, for that equality is unnatural and impossible; not abundance of inappropriate opportunities, for such abundance is of no avail; but accessibility of such appropriate opportunities as the individual can utilize for his own benefit and that of society. What we seek is equality but not identity of opportunity." Identity prevents equality.

4. "Uniformity is the curse of American schools. That any school or college has a uniform product should be regarded as a demonstration of inferiority—of incapacity to meet the legitimate demands of

a social order whose fundamental principle is that every career should be open to talent. Selection of studies for the individual, instruction addressed to the individual, irregular promotion, grading by natural capacity and rapidity of attainment, and diversity of product as regards age and acquisitions, must come to characterize the American public school, if it is to answer the purpose of a democratic society."

5. "Education is properly the development and training of the individual body, mind, and will; but when it is systematized, and provided for many thousands of pupils simultaneously, it almost inevitably takes to military or mechanical methods; and these methods tend to produce a lock-step and a uniform speed, and result in a drill at word of command rather than in the free development of personal power in action. The interests of the individual are frequently lost sight of, or, rather, are served only as the individual can be treated as an average atom in a heterogeneous mass. This natural tendency in systems of education I believe to be a great evil, particularly in a democratic society, where other influences, governmental, industrial, and social, tend toward averaging the human stock."

6. "In any room of a perfectly graded school we find, in the fall, a single class of from forty to sixty children who are supposed to have had the same preparation for their coming year's work; who are to have the same lessons, in the same books, at the same times, under the same teacher, throughout the year; who are to make as nearly as possible the same progress every day in each subject, and to submit to the same tests at the same intervals. They are all kept together, day by day, as far as is possible. The bright ones never work to their utmost, and are frequently marking time; the slow ones are urged forward at a rate which drives some of them to despair; and the ideal of the class is that of equal preparation, equal capacity, equal progress, and equal attainments. If, at the beginning of the year, the children are obtrusively unequal in capacity or attainments, it is an inconvenience to be regretted. The teachers will not be able to "handle her class" so easily as she could if they were all of the same mental size and strength. If, at the end of the year, they have not been pretty well evened up, the teacher has been less successful than she could have wished. This is an extreme statement of the most undesirable uniformity in schools. This is the sense in which close grading is an educational curse. In my opinion, the right aims, in any room of a school, are to recognize at the beginning of the year, as promptly as possible, the different capacities and powers of the children; to carry them forward, throughout the year, each at his own gait and speed; and to turn them out at the end very much more different in capacity and attainments than they were at the beginning. It has always seemed to me that a teacher who did not discharge his pupils at the end of each year much more unlike in powers and acquisitions than they were at the beginning was a proved failure. We all know that children, like adults, are not alike, but infinitely different; that the object of education, as of life, is to bring out the innate powers and develop to the highest possible degree the natural and acquired capacities of each individual."

7. "A school or college must be a machine in some degree. Let it be to the least possible degree. Let us avoid to the utmost cast-iron rules, arbitrary enactments, and uniform prescriptions. Of course classification is necessary in every large school or college. Let it be as flexible and as frequently renewed as pos-

sible. Tests of faithfulness and of mental condition are also necessary at stated periods; but these tests should be directed to ascertaining what the pupils can do, as well as what they know. There must be examinations, anticipated and unanticipated. Let them always be conducted by the teacher, for the teachers, and as helps and guides in teaching and in learning."

8. "The goal in all education, democratic or other, is always receding before the advancing contest, as the top of a mountain seems to retreat before the climber, remoter and higher summits appearing successively as each apparent summit is reached. Nevertheless, the goal of the moment in education is always the acquisition of knowledge, the training of some permanent capacity for productiveness or enjoyment, and the development of character."

9. "Another important function of the public school in a democracy is the discovery and development of the gift or capacity of each individual child. This discovery should be made at the earliest practicable age, and, once made, should always influence, and sometimes determine, the education of the individual. It is for the interest of society to make the most of every useful gift or faculty which any member may fortunately possess; and it is one of the main advantages of fluent and mobile democratic society that it is more likely than any other society to secure the fruition of individual capacities. To make the most of any individual's peculiar power, it is important to discover it early, and then train it continuously and assiduously. It is wonderful what apparently small personal gifts may become the means of conspicuous service or achievement, if only they get discovered, trained, and applied."

10. "In the ideal democratic school no two children would follow the same course of study or have the same tasks, except that they would all need to learn, as far as possible, the use of the elementary tools of education—reading, writing, and ciphering. The different children would hardly have any identical needs. There might be a minimum standard of attainment in every branch of study, but no maximum. There, perception or discovery of the individual gift or capacity would often be effected in the elementary school, but more generally in the secondary; and the making of these discoveries should be held one of the most important parts of the teacher's work. The vague desire for equality in a democracy has worked great mischief in democratic schools. There is no such thing as equality of gifts or powers or faculties, among either children or adults. On the contrary, there is the utmost diversity; and education and all the experience of life increase these diversities, because school, and the earning of a livelihood, and the reaction of the individual upon his surroundings, all tend strongly to magnify innate diversities. The pretended democratic school with an inflexible program is fighting not only against nature, but against the interests of democratic society. Flexibility of program should begin in the elementary school, years before the period of secondary education is reached. There should be some choice of subjects of study by ten years of age, and much variety by fifteen years of age."

III

In these statements President Eliot clearly anticipated not only the ideal but also the methodology of the cumulative record and of the systematic use of comparable measures as advocated by the Personnel Committee of the American Council on Education.

The cumulative record was first pub-

lished by the American Council in July 1928, and it has been adopted or adapted by hundreds of schools and colleges all over the country. As a means of implementing the cumulative record, the American Council organized the Cooperative Test Service in 1929 with the aid of a ten-year subvention from the General Education Board. An average of five comparable forms of tests on the common aspects of the fundamental subjects of secondary school and junior college levels has been completed to date. These tests have been used by schools and colleges in every state of the Union. The use of these centrally made comparable tests has exposed and brought to light more problems than it has thus far solved. Among the most important of these newly sensed problems, two are especially significant: first, both schools and colleges have come to realize the limitations as well as the indispensable values of comparable tests, and have shown an increased willingness to cooperate in the difficult work of extending the usefulness of testing techniques to wider areas of learning beyond the boundaries of traditional subject-matter divisions; and second, teacher-training institutions have come to realize two serious defects, (a) that they have not been maintaining really professional standards, and (b) that they have neglected the most important aspect of professional education, namely, training prospective classroom teachers in the difficult but indispensable work of studying and learning individual pupils as a prerequisite to guiding and teaching them in accordance with their individual needs.

IV

It may help here to state briefly a conception of the objectives of non-professional education. And in stating objectives of education, one must always make a clear distinction between professional and vocational education, on the one hand, and non-professional or general education, on the other. Professional schools and colleges have a duty or responsibility to the public which is paramount to, but not necessarily in conflict with, their allegiance to the welfare of their students. This paramount duty is, briefly, to protect the public from incompetent physicians, from ignorant lawyers, and from illiterate teachers. For students in medical and other professional schools, prescribed curricula and absolute standards are not only defensible but necessary, and should be rigorously enforced at all costs, especially in teacher-training institutions.

But in our public schools which are supported by the taxpayers for all the children of all the people, the paramount responsibility of all teachers is the welfare and better citizenship of the individual child. The objectives of education in our public schools are accordingly: first, to try to ascertain the intellectual, personal, and social needs of each individual child; and second, to try to meet those needs, whatever they may happen to be. In other words, the purpose is to make the individual child a better and happier citizen, with the help of the currently accepted curriculum if possible, but in spite of that curriculum and its correlative standards if necessary. Neither curricula nor standards have any defense or validity except as they are constructively related to the abilities, interests, and needs of growing individuals. The teacher's duty to learn the child is prior and paramount to the duty to teach the child. Mass prescriptions and uniform mass standards are wholly incompatible with the ideal that our schools should exert a constructive influence on all our children, whether they be budding geniuses,

mediocrities, or full-fledged academic morons. We have no right to ask or encourage any pupil to learn a subject unless we have reasonable grounds for believing at least two things: first, that the pupil has the necessary ability or capacity to learn that subject; and second, that learning that subject will, all things considered, tend to make him a better and happier citizen more surely than would anything else he might do with his energies at that time and place.

The criteria of individual education which are suggested below arise naturally from the foregoing objectives, and their validity depends inescapably upon the validity of those objectives. Without stating some obvious, and some not-so-obvious caveats, these criteria of individualized education are offered in the form of direct questions addressed to each teacher in regard to each of her pupils:

1. Is your objective the improvement of this pupil as an individual in society, or is it your purpose to force the pupil to conform to a predetermined ideal pattern? Are you starting with the pupil's learning abilities and needs, or with what the curriculum has said all pupils "ought to learn."?

2. Is your prescription for him based upon sufficient information regarding the abilities, interests, and needs of the pupil as an individual and social being? Are you avoiding, on the one hand, the enforcement of a set curriculum dictated *ex cathedra*, and, on the other hand, an abdication to the irresponsible whims and laziness of the pupil?

3. Is your prescription directed solely to academic objectives, or does it include the objectives of personal development, social adjustment, and constructive habits and attitudes?

4. Do you recognize that your prescription is instrumental and provisional rather than a sacrosanct objective made and handed down to be achieved at all cost?

5. Does your prescription take account of extra-school influences upon the learning habits and attitudes of your pupils?

6. Is the pupil successful in doing what has been assigned to him? Does he realize that he is successful, and does he get the satisfaction which comes only from success?

7. Is the pupil really interested in what he is doing and satisfied by doing it? Does he see any value in doing it?

8. Does the pupil work aggressively without external compulsion?

9. Is your judgment of the academic success of the pupil based upon what you think the pupil can do, or are you judging and rating the pupil in relation to a predetermined absolute standard?

10. In judging and rating the pupil, do you consider only academic subject-matter success, or do you give adequate weight to non-academic types of abilities and achievements and to personal and social factors?