

Harmful Myths that Guide Canada's Public Schools

By Mark Holmes

This is the first of a series of short articles summarizing the problems that arise when large monopolistic bureaucracies develop first belief systems unrelated to reality.

Individualized instruction is better than group instruction, which is better than whole-class instruction.

There is no doubt that most influential educators believe the above statement. At first sight, the myth seems like common sense. Surely the ideal teaching situation is one teacher helping one student. Yet the large-scale research on effective teaching is conclusive that, as a general rule, class instruction is more effective than either group or individual instruction. Recent research does strongly suggest, however, that very carefully-organized group instruction in skill subjects, such as math and reading (with children grouped based on their tested level of achievement), is the most effective of all, but there is no support for the popular ideal of individualization.

There are probably three reasons for this. First, there is the obvious one that even the perfectly-efficient teacher (who could not exist) would not provide every child in a 30-pupil classroom with more than a theoretical maximum of two minutes of instruction in an hour. That means ten minutes maximum a day. Unfortunately, many pupils get as little of ten minutes a day of direct instruction, and most of that not individualized. Realistically, a sensible person learning a major sequential skill would rather have 30 hours of instruction in a class of 30 than one hour of tuition.

Second, in practice there is (and can be) little genuine individualization in an "individualized" classroom. Defenders will say that child-centred classrooms include other kinds of instruction, which they do, but that just reduces still further the theoretical maximum often minutes a day for individual help. Realistically, three or four minutes is the average practical maximum. Our schools are frequently organized deliberately to force a degree of so-called individualization by mixing grade levels in various ways.

Third, learning is not always based on the individual's conscious determination to learn, but on external pressures. Every parent knows that children react differently to various circumstances. Generally-speaking, children learn more when more is expected of them and when the children around them are learning too - provided that the impossible is not expected.

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So, even in theory, individualization is often not the most desirable teaching method for all children. In the normal school situation, it is the worst - except for exceptional children unable to benefit from class or group instruction. A good teacher can find some time, often partly outside school hours, for two children, but not for 30.

(Mark Holmes is the author of the 1995 publication "Canada's Educational Crisis: Problems, Causes and Solutions".)