

The Widening Gap

Individualized learning results in huge variations in achievement and depresses the overall results.

By David Mills

For over five years now, increasing numbers of British researchers have been going to Zurich to visit schools. For good reason. Swiss schools take most young people to a level of general attainment that would be considered impossible in Britain.

At 11, almost 40% of British children are failing badly at school: failing to reach a simple level of attainment, despite being coached for the easy test involved. Boys lag far behind girls. Behavioural problems are increasing.

By contrast, in Zurich not only do the children learn more, but also their behaviour and motivation — according to British teachers — are much better than in Britain. And yet there are far more children from diverse backgrounds and taught in a second language than in Britain. So the question for British researchers was simple. Why does Zurich do so well and Britain so badly?

As a television journalist, I have watched the answer unfold with growing fascination. I have no doubt that British researchers have found the secret to Swiss success — and the reason for British failure. And also for Canadian failure, because Canada has many of the same problems as Britain.

It turned out to be very simple, something that every parent knows, but which British and Canadian education has ignored, with disastrous results.

The 'secret' is that young children, like the rest of us, enjoy doing what they do well. They will not, for example, want to play football if they think they are no good at it. They will not want to go to school if they think they are no good at that either.

Consequently, Swiss children are not allowed to fail in school. Instead, they are carried along in a group of children who are *all* succeeding. Some have to work harder than others to keep up but most manage it and, as the

pace quickens, reach surprising levels of attainment. This was a major discovery for British researchers and one quickly confirmed elsewhere. In successful education systems, young children are *always* protected from failure.

But this raises a tricky question. If young children progress together, then some children — particularly middle-class children — must move forward more slowly than they might. So why do parents allow their children to be held back in this way?

Remarkably perhaps, it turns out that middle-class children also benefit from a slow start. For one thing, the precocious students are called upon to help the other children. They thus develop social skills and become more mature. As well, the slower pace in kindergarten gives all children the chance to build a strong foundation for future learning.

At the same time, no one suffers. Older Swiss German children outperform British and Canadian children *across the board*. Bright Swiss German children may start later, but they still overtake bright children elsewhere.

It is an inspired trade-off which serves both the privileged and the under-privileged. In countries like Britain and Canada, the philosophy is that no child should be held back and each child should move at his own pace according to his own abilities. Although it is a persuasive idea, it turns out not to work in practice.

Why it fails is simple. At age four, a tiny number of children are ready to start reading and writing — so this means that educators feel they must give all children the chance to start doing so at that age, lest these special children be held back.

For the rest of the children, there is, in varying degrees, only failure. They fall behind the 'clever' children and before long conclude that they are

stupid. Four- to six-year-olds feel these things very deeply. And very quickly they respond by giving up.

Children come into education with wide variations in ability. The tragedy of British and Canadian education is that it takes these differences and accentuates them. It widens the gaps between children as they grow older. A large proportion fall ever further behind and end up as ill-educated failures.

It is the children themselves who sabotage individualized learning. The few most successful children make a lot of demands and monopolize much of the teacher's time. Other children — the majority — stay in the background. As differences between children widen, it becomes more and more difficult for teachers to cope.

Many teachers organize their classes into groups but can then spend only a little time with each group. For the rest of the time, children are on their own and quickly become expert at doing the minimum necessary to avoid attracting attention.

They sharpen pencils, change work sheets, repeat work they did the day before, and a hundred other things to hide the extent of their disengagement. Mixing three different age groups all at different levels in the same class makes everything worse.

In Canada, the failure of individualized teaching is, to some extent, compensated for by widespread college education that manages to repair some of the damage.

In Britain, where higher education is for a small elite, there is no such safety net. We have spent 30 years investing in individualized teaching. It has left our teachers demoralized, our state education system in tatters and our national future at risk.

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