INDIVIDUALIZED TEACHING THROUGH GROUP WORK¹

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Abstract

This paper discusses the need to innovate the approach to teaching in order to achieve more effective results in the educational work of students. One of the best ways of modernizing teaching is through the adequate application of individualized teaching, which involves adapting teaching content, methods, means and forms of work to the individual abilities of each student. The paper emphasizes the importance of individualized teaching through the organization of group forms of work, an approach which at the same time ensures the socialization of students and the development of their individual characteristics. The article also presents the articulation of the time required for introducing and teaching the literary prose text "The Story of a Boy and the Moon" by Branko V. Radicevic, in order to point out the extent of learning that can be achieved by applying this form of individualization.

Key words: modernization of teaching, individualized teaching, innovative model, group work.

INTRODUCTION

An ongoing civilizational implies a tendency to raise the quality of life of modern man in all areas. In order to achieve such quality, the introduction of innovations is resorted to. In particular, man insists on the need to innovate in the realm of education, since knowledge is the only sure category that drives and properly orients contemporary social development. The creation of a highly educated society that will be the bearer of change in all spheres of social life, requires the elimination of the shortcomings of the traditional school system. Along with the passive position of students in the acquisition of knowledge, a process which ensures the impossibility of thoughtful engagement in order to gain new knowledge, one of the basic shortcomings of the prevailing classroom system is the frontal form of work that implies an equal teaching approach to all pupils of the same age. This means teaching is adapted to the so-called "average" pupil, which neglects the needs and possibilities of either more successful or weaker students. This state of affairs establishes the need to initiate certain changes in the structure of the school system in order to achieve more effective results.

INDIVIDUALIZED TEACHING

Bearing in mind the fact that students, in view of their intellectual, cognitive, emotional and other psycho-physical abilities, differ greatly from each other, notwithstanding their belonging to the same age group, the teacher must be the initiator of a method that will be adapted to the individual abilities of each student. In this way, the student will be given the

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opportunity to seize and master the necessary knowledge and skills at a pace appropriate to his abilities. Such opportunities provide an individualized teaching approach, defined as one of the innovative work models whose immediate application in practice ensures that each student masters the intended content and builds up his own personality in accordance with the abilities that distinguish him. Thus, an individualized teaching approach involves adapting teaching content, forms of work, teaching methods and resources to the individual abilities of each student in order to achieve the optimal development of his personality.

In the Pedagogical Encyclopedia, the notion of individualized teaching is defined as follows: "In a manner compatible and complementary with differentiation, the individualisation of teaching is a didactic principle that obliges the school and teachers to adjust the goals, content, methods, relationships and assistance of teaching in a way most adapted to the student. This is done to discover and develop a scientific determination of the differences among students; this determination then forms the basis to strive, as much as possible, for a personalized group teaching and learning process, in order to enable students to carry out a relatively independent and autonomous learning. This learning should be harmonized with the overall social goals of teaching, to stimulate the thinker’s own creative thinking and recognize the originality of his personality, to support his hobbies, desires and needs, even if they may have no general significance" (Potkonjak, Šimleša, 1989: 265).

Individualization is based on differentiation, which involves classifying students based on their social, cognitive, psychological and physiological characteristics. However, differentiation also means grouping students by similar or identical features such as abilities, previously acquired knowledge, interests, pace-of-learning, attitudes toward learning, and students' readiness to learn. In this sense, differentiation is a key factor or basis of individualization. In order for a teacher to resort to an individualized teaching process, it is necessary to know the individual differences of his students, because "students are not equal - they have neither the same knowledge nor an equally built mental structure" (Lazarevic, 2005: 49). Research demonstrates that students of the same age are very different in their physical and mental abilities, as well as in general abilities and knowledge. Physical differences are the category that can be most easily assessed because physical properties can be detected without any special measurement and verification. A much more difficult task is to spot the differences in the mental development of children because various methods of objective measurement are required to determine the degree of inequality. It’s also important to bear in mind that differences can be high among pupils with the same general abilities, as well as among those students who have the same knowledge at their disposal.

THE FORMS OF IMPLEMENTATION OF INDIVIDUALIZED TEACHING

Within the preparatory stage for the organization of individualized teaching, the teacher defines the appropriate format of individualization, taking into account the specific situation in which the learning process shall be carried out, as well as the availability of teaching materials and materials for work. In order to decide on the application of a particular form of individualized teaching, the teacher himself is expected to first objectively evaluate his own possibilities to successfully realize his task, to know well his students and the differences that exist among them, as well as all the ways and possibilities in individualization teaching that would create the conditions for its adequate and efficient implementation.

Numerous authors provide different classifications of individualized formats of teaching. However, based on the classification of individualized types of teaching by the majority of authors and on the basis of the knowledge provided by teaching practice, the most commonly applied implemented types of individualization would be:
- individually planned teaching;
- teaching at a higher level of content;
- individualization of teaching by means of teaching tracts;
- individualization using programmed teaching;
- individualization of teaching through group work;
- supplementary and additional instruction;
- individual teacher instruction;
- differentiated teaching materials and
- individualized homework.

**INDIVIDUALIZED TEACHING THROUGH GROUP WORK**

The group form of work is based on the division of classes into several smaller groups that work together to solve the same or differentiated tasks. Individualized teaching by this type of work is provided by resolving the differentiation of tasks within groups, whereby the actual tasks are differentiated according to the individual abilities of students. In addition to differentiation, tasks for the work of students in groups can be prepared in such a way that tasks are equal to all members of the group. Such groups must be homogeneous in terms of general abilities, acquired knowledge and interests. This is very difficult to achieve, and more often than not one resorts to the formation of groups that receive differentiated tasks for independent work (Vilotijevic and Vilotijevic, 2008). In this way, pupils adopt the program's intended content.

A significant feature of the group form of work is the possibility of socialization. Man is a social being and as such has the need to associate with other members of the community in order to meet basic existential and other needs. In the process of integration with other members of the community, man is increasingly developing his individuality, that is, the differences between individuals are emphasized.

Many methodologists are of the opinion that a group form of work should be applied to older classes. The fact is, however, that the atmosphere of group work promotes the intellectual and social development of students. Most methodologists therefore believe that starting from the first grade of elementary school, children should gradually get used to work within groups, which would actively involve them in the teaching process. Working in groups brings out richer and more constructive contacts among children, developing more dynamic relationships that contribute to increased engagement and an achievement of desired results. This kind of work enables the realization of important educational tasks, such as developing a cooperative spirit, directing attention to common problems, cooperating in order to solve a problem. Precisely because of this, group work equally favors both extroverted and introverted students. In order for tasks to be done successfully, more extroverted learners must adapt to the needs and goals of the whole group. On the other hand introverted pupils, while working in a group, are gradually freed from inhibitions and become more open to cooperation.

When formation of a group is concerned, the teacher must take into account the number of each group, as well as the way in which they will be formed. The formation of groups is conditioned by the total number of students in the class. It is most important to provide a healthy atmosphere in which the teams will work well on properly-designed tasks tailored to each individual group. An optimal group is one that is composed of between five and seven members. A group with a smaller or larger number of students would be unable to meet the requirements for quality knowledge-acquisition. The number of members in a group also
depends on the age of the students. Thus, younger students prefer work in larger groups, while older students are more likely to work in groups of three to four members. This when they are the most productive.

The teaching content needed to be taught, the age and abilities of students, and the space that the school has at its disposal, determine the way in which the groups will be formed. Accordingly, there are so-called art groups formed on the basis of student talent levels, workgroups formed on the basis of different psycho-physical abilities, and groups based on the friendly relationships of its members. In order for this third category of groups to form, it is necessary to take some time for students to get to know each other better. "When students in a new group activity see a favorable opportunity to exercise their abilities, knowledge, skills and preferences, they will be motivated to participate actively in carrying out group tasks" (Djordjevic, 1985: 80).

Each group should have its own representative or leader who will organize and direct the work of other members in order to carry out the assigned tasks. This, however, does not have to be an obligation or precondition for the groups to successfully function. Throughout the process of organizing and realizing group forms of work, the greatest responsibility lies with the teacher who has to take care of all the mentioned factors. His primary task is to provide timely assistance to students, (if there is a need for that), to encourage and direct students' attention to carrying out the tasks set. Teachers are also expected to promote the development of co-operative relationships and socialization within groups; teachers should equally encourage the competitive spirit among the groups themselves. In that sense, while the groups are working on carrying out tasks, students should not be demanding complete silence since it is necessary to communicate with each other in order to arrive at a common approach to solving the assigned task. That is the essence of group work.

Once the work is completed, each individual group of results shall be reported. In this phase, a representative of each group presents the results of their work. It should be necessary to include other groups in order to correct or supplement the answers provided. That coordination should be carried out by a teacher. The teacher should direct a healthy discussion of students, to encourage them to explain their attitudes and opinions. Therefore, Vilotijevic thinks that the advantages of group work for a teacher are precisely what "enables him to come to a direct discussion between students" (Vilotijevic, 1999: 187). However it is not only limited to that. When applied in group work, "individualization enables us to discuss, experiment, set different tasks and questions, encourage problem solving, and work with each student individually; it enables a teacher to provide students with more attention, to understand their desires, their potential, strengths or weaknesses. Students in group work freely expose their ideas and their opinions by comparing them with those of others, similar to themselves, but also to those who are different, and in this way they perceive their own developmental level "(Djukic, 1995: 97).

"Research on the values of group work and teaching practice itself, demonstrate that working in a group for individual students represents a significant motivation (by surely proving himself) and that it increases the overall effect of teaching and training. Group work has, therefore, its value as a form of differentiation and individualization, provided it is embedded in the general system of teaching and training "(Djordjevic, 1985: 81).

Below you will find an example of the preparation of a selected prose literary text using individualized teaching through group work to showcase the productivity that can be achieved.
An example of a model teaching unit

Method data:
Teaching title "The Story of the Boy and the Moon" - Branko V. Radicevic

Type of class: learning
Goal of the class: Aesthetic analysis of the text "The Story of a Boy and a Moon" - Branko V. Radicevic.

Educational tasks:
Training: developing a love for reading literary works; developing gentle and pleasant feelings drawn from the literary work; formation of literary taste of students; developing a sensibility for the aesthetic experience of works of art; training students to recognize and experience true artistic values and beauty in literary works and the surrounding world; encouraging positive personality traits and honorable behavior among students; stimulating the imagination; developing and cultivating moral values.

Educational: training students for an experience and analysis of literary and artistic work; training students for independent analysis and interpretation of literary texts; spotting and understanding the content of the story; analysis of characters, their characteristics, actions and behaviors; discovering the relationship between the world of reality and the world of imagination; enriching vocabulary; further work on oral and written expression of students; repeating and expanding terms: story, writer, composition.

Functional tasks: training students to be active participants in the teaching process; developing a cooperative spirit within student group work; developing logical thinking and conclusions.


Forms of work: teacher facing the class and group work
Teaching tools: text stories, school exercises for groups
Correlation: nature and society, fine arts
Research tasks for homework:
• Read carefully "The Story of the Boy and the Moon" – by Branko V. Radičević.
• Remind yourself of who Branko V. Radicevic is and which of his stories you were taught in the third grade.
• What characters appear in this fairy tale? What is the relationship between the boy Radojica and the Moon?
• Discover the fantastic elements in this story.
• Which part of the fairy tale made the strongest impression on you and why?
• Think about the characteristics of the characters and their actions.
• While reading the story, pay attention to unknown words, highlight them and try to find their meaning at the end of the book.

Structure of the course
1. Emotional-intellectual preparation of students
2. Introduction of the teaching subject
3. Oral reading of the story
4. Testing the experience
5. Interpretation of unknown words and expressions
6. Formation of groups and analysis of the story
7. Reporting on and integrating the results
8. Independent and creative work of the students
9. Homework

Flow of the course

Emotional-intellectual preparation of the students

Right at the start of the course we verify whether the students did the homework. We ask them if they all read "The Story of the Boy and the Moon", whether they liked it and why. Then we ask the students to tell us something about the author of this story, Branko V. Radicevic. Students are expected to recall the story of "The Lonely One" of the author of the same name which was studied in the third grade. If their knowledge is incomplete, the teacher provides additional information about the writer. One of the research tasks for homework refers to the characters that appear in the text. After learning and listing all the characters that are mentioned, we ask the students to tell us about the relationship between the boy Radojica and the Moon. At the same time, we analyze all the fantastic moments in the story.

Introduction of the teaching subject

The teacher announces and introduces the teaching subject and writes the title on the board; the students do so in their notes.

Interpretative reading of the story

The teacher again expressively reads the text in order for the children to better and more emotionally experience the story. Students listen attentively.

A brief psychological break and probing of the experience of enjoyment of the story

In order to probe this experience, we ask a few more questions:

- Do you like this story?
- Why?
- What's interesting about it?
- What fantastic moments do you notice?
- What kind of boy is Radojica, and what kind of a boss is “Hardhead”?
- What kind of feelings did this story provoke in you?

Interpretation of unknown words and expressions

Students within the scope of their homework received instructions to pull out unknown words from the text and try to find out their meaning. We ask them whether they did this, and then we write the unknown words and their explanations on the board. We assume that some of the unknown words might be the following:

- **Scales** - stairs
- **Hats** - heels
- **Spotted** - beautiful, nice for the eye
- **Hardhead** - a selfish man
- **Hoops** - tera
- **Take a bath** - take off

*Formation of groups and analysis of the story*

In this phase of the course we apply an individualized teaching approach. Students are divided into four groups based on their abilities and results. Each group receives a tutorial on questions and tasks tailored to the cognitive and intellectual abilities of the children. The teacher determines the representatives of each group who will report the results after completion of the work.

**First teaching exercise**
1. From whom did the writer hear this story?
2. Where and with whom did the boy Radojica live and what did he do?
3. What did the boy want?
4. Who helped him to realize his child's dream?

**Second exercise**
1. How was “Hardhead”? Why did not he just go outside to see the Moon coming down the silver scale?
2. How did “Hardhead” behave towards Radojica? List the text from which you can find out.
3. What did the boy say to the Moon? What did he long for?
4. How does the story end?

**Third teaching exercise**
1. Which book would the boy want to read? Why?
2. Why did the Moon come to Radojica's room? What qualities did you notice?
3. What message is communicated in this story?
4. Find the fantastic elements in the story and list them.

**Fourth teaching exercise**
1. What do you think, is “Hardhead” happy? Why?
2. What do the spiteful people look like? What qualities do they possess?
3. How do you understand the sentence: "I would have found the wisest book in the world in which is written how to wipe out misery on earth"? What do you think, did the boy Radojica choose the right way to do this?
4. Why are the first and last sentences in the text the same?

*Reporting on and integrating the results*

Group representatives announce their answers before the class. Other students listen, complement with their own view, and express their opinions. Afterword the results are merged and conclusions drawn in terms of character traits and messages.

**Characterization:**
- Radojica - good, handsome, wise, worthy, modest, persistent
- Hardhead - selfish, spiteful, evil, dangerous, mischievous
- Moon - noble, humorous, compassionate, good, generous

The following is the message of the story, and it could be formulated as follows:

*The mind can handle more thoughts than water in the sea.*

*Independent and creative work of the students*
This portion of the course relates to encouraging the child’s creativity. Therefore, we give the students the task of writing the titles of the chapters found in the wisest book that Radojica had read.

**Homework**

As homework, the students have to think and write about what Radojica's life would look like if “Hardhead” was not a selfish and spiteful man, but a benevolent and generous one.

**CONCLUSION**

Compared to a traditional approach based on a teacher facing the class and interpreting the textual content of a text equally to all students in the classroom, individualization allows the interpretation of the content of the text through well-prepared tasks at several levels that takes into consideration the different intellectual, cognitive, psychological and other abilities of the students; it also takes into account the ability of students to relive and react to these texts and tasks emotionally. Every child is in a position to adequately respond to the demands of the teachers, reaching the maximum intellectual and emotional engagement and development. The student, in accordance with his personal capacities, reaches the level of understanding and emotional experience of the work that is expected of him. It is assumed that in this way the student will be able to reach the upper limit of general development and advancement. In addition, student motivation is recognized to be higher than usual, because when a weaker student succeeds in responding to set tasks, he feels pleased with himself and his self-esteem grows. Equally it intensifies the student’s desire for further engagement and an increased workload to obtain confirmation that his efforts were not futile. The traditional approach does not allow this. On the contrary, when a student realizes that he cannot keep up with those students who successfully master all the content, the weaker child is demoralized and there is no urge to develop a need for work and advancement. On the other hand, even gifted learners get the opportunity to reach the maximum of their psych-social development through individualized teaching, since the questions and tasks in this case are adapted to their capabilities and interests. The conclusion to draw is that individualized teaching benefits all categories of students.

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