



What is individual in individualised instruction? Five storylines of meeting individual needs at school



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this narrative case study was to examine the meanings and practices of individualised instruction narrated by two seventh-grade Finnish pupils with mild learning difficulties, their mothers, their special education teacher and researchers. The data comprise narrative interviews and field notes. The analysis showed that the narrators had various, even conflicting, experiences of individualisation, which was narrated through five storylines: individual needs as difficulties and limitations; individualisation as the ideal principle for inclusive education; individualisation as a bureaucratic procedure; individualised instruction as making room for emotions, and individualised instruction as nothing special. These storylines constructed individualised education as an ideal and eligible pedagogical practice in principle but challenging to properly implement in practice.

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1. Introduction

Individually tailored instruction has traditionally been regarded as a fundamental characteristic of effective special education practices – so fundamental, in fact, that it has been considered the defining feature of special education (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2005; Stecker et al., 2008; Stradling & Saunders, 1993). Along with the spread of the inclusive ideology, individualised instruction has been begun to be emphasized as a central means by which pupil academic and motivational diversity can be addressed also in heterogeneous, mixed-ability classrooms (Broderick, Mehta-Parekh, & Reid, 2005; George, 2005; Lee-Tarver, 2006; Persson, 2008; Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson et al., 2003). There is research evidence that teachers in heterogeneous classrooms adapt their instruction according to individual children's needs and level of academic skills, especially when such children's skills and performance are poorer than those of the other pupils (Nurmi et al., 2013; Nurmi, Viljaranta, Tolvanen, & Aunola, 2012; Pakarinen, Lerjkanen, Poikkeus, Siekkinen, & Nurmi, 2011; Roiha, 2014). This type of individualisation has been found to have positive effects on learning outcomes, such as literacy skills (McDonald Connor, Morrison, Schatschneider, Toste & Lundblom, 2011; McDonald Connor et al., 2009), self-regulation (McDonald Connor, Ponitz, Phillips, Travis, Glasney & Morrison, 2010), and performance in mathematics (Nurmi et al., 2012; Schoppek & Tulis, 2010).

Although individualisation is a relatively widely used concept in the literature, the meanings attributed to it or the experiences of it narrated by different parties, such as parents, teachers and pupils, have not been thoroughly explored. There are a few studies, in which the aim has been to examine teachers' understanding of individualisation (Roiha, 2014) or pupils'

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views of teacher adaptations (Nelson, Epstein, Bursuck, Jayanthi, & Sawyer, 1998; Vehkakoski, 2012). The studies are, however, few and typically concentrate on a very narrow area of individualised instruction such as satisfaction with involvement in writing individual education plans (IEP) (Agran & Hughes, 2008; Fish, 2006) or views on the utility of written IEPs for planning appropriate pedagogy in the classroom (Lee-Tarver, 2006). Therefore, this study addresses the need to examine experiences of individualisation from a larger perspective without limiting the viewpoint to certain dimensions of it or to certain kinds of participants such as either teachers or parents. The purpose of this study is to examine the similarities and differences in meanings and practices of individualised instruction narrated by two seventh-grade Finnish pupils with mild learning difficulties, their mothers and their special education teacher. By doing this, we seek to provide a more multisided picture of individualised instruction and the challenges it presents in practice.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. The concept of individualised instruction

The term of individualisation or individualised instruction has been defined and used in many ways. On the one hand, individualised instruction has been defined to mean the “matching of instruction to individually identified needs” rather than to predetermined curriculum contents that are the same for all pupils (see Landrum & McDuffie (2010, p. 8). On the other hand, in some other studies, individualisation has been simply seen as paying extra attention to some pupils and supporting their learning in special ways during everyday classroom interaction as compared with the support given to pupils on average (e.g., Nurmi et al., 2012, Nurmi et al., 2013). The philosophical basis for individualisation rests on a differentialist ideal, according to which development and learning are primarily considered individual activities. This differs from the universalist and egalitarian orientations that view learning as a collective activity and prioritise the cohesion of the group and social equality of the pupils over individualised instruction (Raveaud, 2005).

In practice, individualised instruction is often carried out through the so called Individualised Education Program (IEP), which determines both what to teach an individual pupil and how to teach it (Landrum & McDuffie, 2010). This explains why individualised instruction has also typically been paralleled by the practice of delivering special education to small groups of pupils (Stecker et al., 2008). To escape the connotations of traditional separate special education that attach to the word “individualisation”, attempts have been made to substitute for it the more neutral term personalized learning (see Rouse & McLaughlin, 2007). However, not all scholars agree that the concept of individualisation in itself necessarily requires the use of accommodations or modifications (Landrum & McDuffie, 2010).

Like the concept of individualised instruction, the more broadly used concept of differentiated instruction also refers to a pupil-centred pedagogical strategy that aims at responding flexibly to individual pupils' learning styles, readiness levels and speeds of learning in order to maximise their learning opportunities in the classroom (Stradling & Saunders, 1993; Tomlinson, 1999). Tomlinson (1999, 2001) divides differentiated instruction into the following areas: adapting the content (e.g., materials, curriculum objectives), adapting the process (e.g., teaching methods, learning tasks, pace of learning), and adapting the products (e.g., assessment and indicators of learning) (see also Raveaud, 2005; Stradling & Saunders, 1993). Although there are obvious similarities between the conceptualizations of differentiation and individualisation, Landrum and McDuffie (2010) consider differentiation as a sub-concept of individualisation that focuses, in particular, on individualised teaching in the context of heterogeneous inclusive classrooms (see also Levy, 2008).

2.2. Challenges related to individualised instruction

Despite positive research results on the outcomes of individualised education, and the widely recognized ideal of giving personalized instruction in Western schools, several researchers around the world have also seen individualisation as problematic. Criticism has particularly focused on the following three aspects: the inadequacy of written IEPs, the gap between children's IEP aims and practical teacher interventions, and low pupil and parent IEP participation. Although these studies have been implemented methodically differently from our study, they document well the tensions and challenges of individualised education, and therefore, afford an important comparison point for meanings and experiences narrated by those who have personal experiences of either realising or receiving individualised instruction.

In the case of written IEPs, Karvonen and Huynh (2007) reported that the quality, length and contents of the IEPs vary considerably. IEPs have been criticized for having objectives that are too broad, vague and not measurable (Boavida, Aguiar, McWilliam, & Pimentel, 2010; Giangreco, Dennis, Edelman, & Cloninger, 1994; Ruble, McGrew, Dalrymple, & Jung, 2010), inadequate descriptions of specially-planned instruction and interventions for specific goals (Ruble et al., 2010), and a one-sided focus on pupils' deficits and individual characteristics rather than on the social context of their problems (Isaksson, Lindqvist & Bergström, 2007). In addition, IEP goals have been reported to be discipline-referenced (Giangreco et al., 1994; Stroggilos & Xanthacou, 2006) and sometimes set more for professionals than pupils (Giangreco et al., 1994). Moreover, the number of specific learning goals pertaining to pupils' basic skills has a tendency to fall as pupils get older (Catone & Brady, 2005; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010) and, despite their progress, pupils experience hardly any changes in their instructional programs (Espin, Deno, & Albayrak-Kaymak, 1998).

When turning from written IEPs to implementing pupil-led teaching in practice, the biggest criticism has focused on the gap between individualisation on paper and in the classroom. An association has not always been found between children's

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