

Leadership Role of the Educational Materials Specialist

Through encouragement of widespread and selective use of materials, the educational materials specialist can play an important leadership role in the improvement of the learning experiences of children and young people.

WHATEVER DESIGNATION is used to identify the educational leader in the field of instructional materials—curriculum materials specialist, librarian, audio-visual director or instructional materials coordinator—a person in this capacity may well find himself immersed in what appears at times to be a maze of unrelated time consuming activity. This activity often ranges from giving attention to clerical details so characteristic of materials centralization to the carrying out of teacher-consultant responsibilities relative to selection, procurement and use of educational materials by the individual and by groups. In a situation where much of this activity is relatively unstructured, or at least not predetermined by “front office” scheduling, the element of decision concerning the burden of one’s emphasis is based upon one’s interpretation of the role called for in a specific situation. I think it is safe to say that we all operate in a particular situation in terms of a philosophy reflecting, in part, the expectations of those with whom we work and

emphasizing to a degree the type of professional activity which represents our respective strengths by which we are able to maintain some feeling of security and equilibrium. It is this philosophy which cloaks our somewhat diverse and sometimes apparently unrelated activities with professional respectability and a measure of unified purposefulness. Without it, we might feel a close kinship with the horseman who, it is said, mounted his steed and rode off in all directions.

Control of Means

Although the development of a working philosophy is a highly individual matter based, as was intimated previously, upon the limiting factors inherent in the specific educational situation and the somewhat restricted manner in which the materials specialist perceives his leadership role, there still remains, I think, a fundamental concept on which most materials specialists operate and it is the interpretation of this concept which determines the variations that exist in our *modus operandi*. I would identify this unifying characteristic—the frame of reference out of which most materials specialists would perceive their role—as the nature of the control

Joseph W. Rendell is librarian, New Jersey State Teachers College, Newark, New Jersey.

which they exert over the materials that have been assigned to their care. Administratively speaking, these materials have been centralized to provide uniform access to a limited selection of materials by all who recognize these as means of identifying new goals or in achieving desired goals. The manner in which this control is exercised, then, represents the individual's interpretation of the leadership role of the materials specialist.

Years ago, centralization of books, manuscripts, maps and other miscellaneous materials was achieved primarily to guarantee the preservation of knowledge and only incidentally, it would seem, to provide a convenient source for those who would utilize such accumulations of knowledge. One Saturday afternoon about a hundred years ago, so the story goes, the librarian of one of our leading colleges was hurrying across the campus and, upon meeting a friend of his, said gleefully, "All the books are on their shelves but one, and I shall have that one back in its place within the hour!" Such was the concept of the materials specialist as it evidently existed during the early part of the nineteenth century—a "control" philosophy which depicted the library, museum or other type of center as a storehouse of materials to be used only by a favored few at the discretion of the director or librarian. A similar philosophy finds expression in the translation of the Chinese character for library which, in short, means a place for hiding books.

This emphasis upon preservation of materials and restricted use of such sources of information and knowledge is not at all difficult to understand

when we realize that the means for replacing or duplicating these intellectual treasures were not so prevalent as they are today. For this reason, therefore, I am not necessarily belittling this preoccupation with the storehouse or museum concept as it existed in the past but am suggesting, rather, that perhaps much of what we do today in exercising control over the body of materials for which we are responsible has its basis, or may even find its sole justification, in this traditional concept of centralization based on the orderly preservation of instructional materials through limited use. Control under these circumstances then is interpreted in its most literal sense to mean that of exercising restraint or holding in check. I fear that in some situations the elaborate processes which have been devised for the acquisition, processing and circulation of materials and the undue concentration upon preparation of detailed regulations and corresponding restrictions which seemingly discourage utilization of materials suggest that some have an obsession akin to longing for the undisturbed orderliness of a storage vault or the quiet inactivity of a nineteenth century library. This relatively narrow interpretation may, for some, represent a legitimate end in and of itself; the goal they deliberately seek. Or this may represent the extent of leadership that they are allowed to exercise in a given situation. After all, instructional materials are expensive—which, to some, would justify rather sparing use, thereby restricting the means that others would find helpful in achieving certain goals.

At the other extreme, the nature of

control can be a means of stimulating and encouraging greater utilization of materials in the attainment of individual or group goals. Constant attention to those aspects of materials organization which contribute to increased accessibility, continued evaluation of circulation procedures in the light of the way it facilitates the flow of materials, and the studied use of detailed statistical records as they reflect future potential needs represent some of the ways in which routine practices can be employed to further the purposes for which a center is organized. Here we see that administrative duties—the so-called routines—no longer represent ends in themselves but can be justified only as they help the director or librarian, the recognized leader, to provide means that individuals or groups desire to use in attaining recognized goals.

Improvement of Learning Experiences

In the first section of this paper, it was intimated that mere accessibility of materials is not enough—that the materials specialist should be encouraged to contribute his specialized fund of knowledge to the problems of curriculum development. Efficient routine leading to ever increasing use of materials as mirrored in the rise of circulation figures can be, for many reasons, a rather superficial way of estimating the growing quality of learning experiences. To my way of thinking, quantity is certainly not a worthy substitute for quality, and only as instructional materials—books, pictures, films, recordings and such—are used to enrich specific learning experiences

can their incorporation in the classroom situation be in any way justified. The fact that certain materials are successfully used by one instructor in a specific situation is no guarantee, therefore, that the same materials will provide an enriched experience for a similar group of learners in another situation. There is no one formula, no one combination of materials that can be applied to similar situations with equal success. This poses one of the most basic challenges facing all educators—the challenge of arranging for each learning situation, with the needs of a particular group of learners always in mind. Each learning situation is in effect unique, tailor made, a pattern that undergoes drastic revision with each succeeding group or class.

In order to understand more fully the nature of this challenge which emphasizes the individuality of each new situation, let us examine briefly some of the aspects of the learning process. Broadly speaking, education is a social process in which individual learning is the result of personal experience. Actually, it is the environment that educates—the combination of factors outside of the individual which gives rise to experience. This continuous interaction, which occurs between the individual and the external factors that comprise the environment, influences or modifies the way in which the individual will act at some future time. Actually, then, the educational process is the vehicle for inducting the young into the society of which the individual is a part and helps him to adopt those behavior patterns that are deemed desirable or acceptable by society. The function of the school in this over-all

pattern is “. . . to furnish the environment which stimulates responses and directs the learner's course. In the last analysis, all the educator can do is modify stimuli so that responses will as surely as is possible result in the formation of desirable intellectual and emotional dispositions.”¹

This would lead us to believe that the educator's main problem is that of so arranging and controlling the environment that the learner may be able to select from it that which will result in a desirable experience, rich in quality. This degree of quality can be measured only as the present experience may promote future desirable experiences. However, the nature of the present experience and its effect on future behavior is first dependent upon the experiences that the learner has undergone in the past; secondly, is affected by the degree of agreeableness that the learner feels toward the situation and resulting experience; and, thirdly, is meaningful to the degree that the learner has opportunity to interact with his surrounding environment—to verbalize, to internalize, to reconstruct his experiences of the past in the light of the new meanings that have come out of the present situation. Only as the learner generalizes in this fashion can he make these new learnings his own. Thus fortified, he is able to formulate future intelligent choices based on that which he has taken as a result of past experience. In short, the quality of experience is based on the way in which the present learning

¹John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, New York, Macmillan Co., 1916, p. 212.

situation may fit into the experiential continuum of the individual.

From the foregoing, we would conclude that the school curriculum is experience centered. Hollis Caswell has suggested that the curriculum is composed of all the experiences that the learner undergoes while under the jurisdiction of the school. William Featherstone refines it still further by saying that the curriculum is composed of a limited and selected body of experience which the school deliberately uses for educational purposes. Whether these experiences are initiated within the confines of the school is immaterial. The purpose of the school is to clarify, illuminate, explain, enrich, and rationalize youth's experiences no matter where the experience originates.²

Selecting the Materials

We would define the word curriculum as that which the learner elects to take from those situations which the school deliberately uses for educational purposes. Of course, what the learner may choose to select from a situation and what the instructor thinks or hopes he takes may actually be poles apart. To put it another way, what the educator conceives the curriculum to be in terms of subject matter that has been introduced into the classroom situation and actually what the curriculum is in terms of student learning may bear no resemblance whatsoever. Since the teacher, therefore, is unable to select experiences for each learner, the only alternative is for that teacher to select carefully the materials which

²William B. Featherstone, *A Functional Curriculum for Youth*, New York, American Book Company, 1950, p. 32.

are to make up the classroom situation—being ever mindful of such things as the value of continuity, that is, the relation of what has gone before with what is to follow; the need for interaction, or the opportunity for each person to internalize new learning in order that he can perceive relationships and acquire new meanings; and the importance of fostering a sense of agreeableness or satisfaction which is so influential in determining whether the learner is free to assimilate new learnings.

On the basis of this interpretation of the curriculum, we see that the task of the educator involves more than just the orderly presentation of subject matter—that such subject content which we in the past have traditionally thought of as the curriculum of the school is but a part of the total situation from which the learner derives his experience. The organization of a classroom situation with all its component parts requires attention to the establishment of a climate or atmosphere calling upon the cooperative energies of all who are involved in the learning situation. The teacher alone cannot hope to select and arrange an educative environment that would result in worth-while experience for all. Unless the learners themselves are brought into the planning, there can be no guarantee that sufficient attention will be given to such essential items as the learners' needs and interests, awareness of experiential continuity, and opportunity for this interaction mentioned previously as being so essential in guiding the learner toward better intellectual ordering of experience. In the words of John

Dewey, "It is not the business of the school to transport youth from an environment of activity into one of cramped study of records or other men's learning; but to transport them from an environment of relatively chance activities into one of activities selected with reference to guidance of learning."³

Constructing the School Environment

It is at this point that the materials specialist can again be brought back into the picture as one who can provide some assistance to the teacher and learners in constructing their school environment, for he is in a position to make available a great body of materials and suggested activities that could enrich or enhance each learning situation. The materials specialist should be the first to recognize, however, that the mere introduction of a variety of materials into the classroom does not necessarily provide enrichment. No one film, or recording, set of pictures, or reading assignment is, in itself, significant. In fact, no one combination of materials will necessarily ensure desirable results—although the value of individual material may certainly be strengthened by the way in which it is used in relation to other materials or activities. The potential usefulness or value of any or all materials rests not within itself but in terms of the group readiness, needs and interests. "Materials of learning must be defined, selected, used and evaluated in concrete relation to their usefulness at some point on the continuum of purposeful school learning. Any given material has value only as it promotes

³ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, New York, Macmillan Co., 1916, p. 320.

desirable development of the learner at a specific time on his route toward adult levels of understanding and performance.”⁴

Instructional materials as such, then, offer no panacea for educational ills. Unfortunately, with the recent introduction of a variety of newer communication media to the classroom situation, there has been some tendency to accept unquestioningly the infallibility of these new materials regardless of the way they might be used. True, the introduction of educational films, slides, filmstrips, recordings and improved pictorial material; use of maps, globes, charts and diagrams; and the introduction of manipulative objects in the form of models, mock-ups and specimens have, when properly introduced and integrated in the situation, supplemented and enriched the traditional symbolic materials associated with the schoolroom environment. But to use a film just for the sake of using a film, to draw on non-related materials merely because the “use of audio-visual aids is the thing to do,” can be the means for justifying some of the lay criticism concerning the so-called anti-intellectualism pervading modern education. As Barnes points out in the article quoted above—a variety of materials may do nothing but confuse, the use of a film may prove to be an absolute waste of time in some situations, direct experience may at times limit learning, charts and maps may, for some, conceal meaning. On the other hand, these newer bodies of materials should not be singled out

⁴ Fred P. Barnes, “Materials of Learning—and Learning,” *Educational Leadership*, 9:402, April 1952.

unduly as representing the only material that is poorly used, for even the use of those materials that have more traditional acceptance may be open to question. Books, at times, may represent uneconomical avenues to learning, oral and written language may lead to false constructs, and typical schoolroom activity or busywork may be a block to learning.⁵ The point I wish to make is that the use of any materials in isolation—as something separate and apart from the organized learning situation—suggests a methodology that has little to offer. I believe that one of the basic responsibilities of the materials specialist is to see that all materials are used only as they are considered integral parts of the learning situation; that, from the standpoint of criteria for selection and evaluation, they should all meet the same rigid standards that any suggested activity, project or other type of experience would meet before being recognized as a desirable feature of a planned environment.

Incorporating All Materials

At the risk of changing my emphasis somewhat, I would suggest that the above would be a strong argument for the incorporation of all instructional materials in one centralized organization—both book and non-book types of resources.

“Instead of emphasizing the mechanical separateness of the various media—instead of imagining conflicts between them—we should, I think, as librarians, concern ourselves with the content and educational purposes of all of them. If we do think in terms of content and pur-

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 403.

pose, we will unhesitatingly relate books with films, slides, or recordings whenever they supplement each other. . . . We will consciously use them together.”⁶

A unified organization combining the traditional library and audio-visual center helps to minimize this tendency to look upon certain instructional aids as entirely unique and therefore unrelated to the general educational process. “We give people not wax, not phonographs, but the spoken word—the poem, the story, the drama told aloud. We give them not film, not projectors and beaded screens, but the vision of life recreated for their pleasure and understanding. These are the things that books are made of, too, and therein lies real unity.”⁷

Only as the materials specialist approaches this task of curriculum improvement from the standpoint of the learners’ needs can he appreciate the inter-relatedness of these various media. His concern is not with variety for variety’s sake, nor should he identify himself with the use of any one medium to the exclusion of the others. Diversity in materials should indicate, rather, that he is more adequately prepared to help meet the needs of many different learning situations resulting from individual differences in an increasingly varied educational program.

⁶ Raynard C. Swank, “Sight and Sound in the World of Books,” *Educational Screen*, 32:437, December 1953.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 446.

The learner then becomes his focus, and only as he works with instructors and students in identifying, locating, and employing those materials leading to desirable experiences is he assuming his role of curriculum worker.

As a curriculum worker, the materials specialist finds much of his time and energies devoted to the establishment and maintenance of a congenial working relationship with the teachers in the school or system in which he operates. His success as a consultant is reflected in the manner in which the instructors with whom he works increase their effectiveness in the classroom. The ultimate selection of materials and the construction of learning situations, of course, rest with the teacher; but the materials specialist, or consultant, can help the instructor to appreciate the contribution that instructional materials make to a learning situation; he can suggest guidelines for the selection of materials; he can work with the teaching staff in planning their most effective usage. In short, the effectiveness of his leadership activity is dependent upon what he does and not on what he is by virtue of title. He works best as a member of a team whose activities leading to curriculum improvement are the result of group planning, shared leadership and a freedom to experiment with solutions to problems that, basically, are rooted in the local situation itself.



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