

# **Role of the Laboratory School in Introducing Educational Practices**

**This article describes the role of one campus laboratory school in studying and evaluating new projects and innovations in education.**

**T**HE WORK OF great laboratory schools through the years has made significant contributions to modern elementary education. Had such experimental centers as John Dewey's Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, the University of Missouri Elementary School, the Lincoln School at Teachers College, the Ohio State University School, and the Elementary School of the University of Iowa not blazed the trail in curriculum development, our schools today might be little different from those our grandparents attended. The influence of these schools upon the thinking and practice of school people has, indeed, been great.

The recognition, for example, that boys and girls grow and develop at individual rates within the framework of a pattern that is common to all children, and that all behavior is caused, has significantly modified modern school practices. Much of the implementation of what is known concerning the nature of the learner and of learning can be credited to the experimentalists in the laboratory schools. These schools helped us move away from the concept of the mind as a

muscle to be exercised or as a receptacle into which facts could be poured, to the realization that learning is most effective when it is consistent with the needs and interests of children. Most of us now see the need for teachers and children to plan and work together in a democratic relationship. The need has also been made apparent for a closer home-school relationship in order to better understand the whole child and how to meet his needs for security, adequacy, belongingness and affection. These early laboratory schools also demonstrated that the environment outside the classroom as well as inside is rich in material and human resources for learning. A functional approach to teaching subject matter and fundamental skills has come through organizing learning experiences around problems or large topics of interest and utilizing experiences that are related.

The reader is referred for an excellent and more comprehensive treatment of significant contributions of laboratory schools to Rose Lammell's Chapter XI on "Experimental Centers as Trail-Breakers and Accelerators in

Curriculum Change," in the Thirteenth Yearbook (1953) of the John Dewey Society, *The American Elementary School*. This chapter reviews the nature and effects of the major types of experimentation carried on in the pioneer schools.

### Dilemma of the Campus School

Despite these historic contributions of laboratory schools, modern school conditions create a dilemma as to the role of the campus laboratory school. In these latter schools, teacher education functions have frequently become confused with research functions. Many educators therefore believe it necessary to clarify the functions of the campus school. At the annual meeting of National Elementary School Principals recently held in Denver, the principals of campus laboratory schools met for the first time as a group to think through this problem.

While student teaching has been the primary function of most campus schools, there are those who believe that this emphasis cannot be justified. There is practice and opinion to support the plan of confining the teacher education responsibilities of the campus laboratory school to those of observation and limited participation. In such cases public schools off campus are being utilized for full time student teaching.

The advisability of carrying on extensive research, of general significance to American schools, in those laboratory schools faced with even limited responsibilities for preservice teacher education seems doubtful. Research of this nature should not be carried on simultaneously with observation and

---

*Glenn G. Thomas is associate professor of education, University of Miami, and is principal of the Henry S. West Laboratory School, Dade County Schools, Coral Gables, Florida.*

---

participation since it requires the complete attention of the people conducting it. Many times, too, in such a setting, it is necessary to deviate from generally accepted practices to such a degree that it would not be a practical situation for the teacher in training.<sup>1</sup> It appears likely, then, that fundamental, scientific research requiring methodical controls and measurements, if it is to be done, will need to be carried on by other schools established for that purpose.

It does not follow that no experimentation can be a part of the campus laboratory school. Any school, worthy of the adjective good, is constantly striving to improve its program. The school that is not trying to find better ways of performing its function is, instead, permitting its program to become sterile. An experimental attitude and some techniques of gathering and evaluating evidence are required to maintain a dynamic program. The campus laboratory school, just as any good school, should be concerned with some kind of experimentation. But if the laboratory school is to provide for observation and participation by preservice teachers, then the experimentation it carries on needs to be confined to those innovations which can be tried out satisfactorily under these conditions.

<sup>1</sup> See H. L. Caswell, "Place of the Campus Laboratory in the Education of Teachers," *Teachers College Record*, April 1949, for an elaboration of this point of view.

Those associated with the West Laboratory School also believe that study and observation of practices in one school by the staffs of other schools in the same system may result in some limited dissemination of promising practices. The idea of experimentation to which this school is committed is basically one of a center for the *innovation* of new practices in Dade County. As we see it, various practices might be tried out first here, and be evaluated by the school faculty for the school's purposes and also studied by other faculties for applicability in sister schools. It is not assumed that basic research on teaching-learning processes will be conducted in this situation.

### Plan of One Campus School

An example of a laboratory school planning to function in this way is the Henry S. West Laboratory School located in Coral Gables, Florida. Jointly operated by the Dade County Board of Public Instruction and the University of Miami's School of Education, the school is an ultra-modern structure consisting of two classroom buildings (two more to be added in 1956-57), an administration building, and a cafeteria all linked together by covered walkways. Built for Florida living, the exterior of the buildings is largely composed of movable glass jalousies. The school, which opened in September 1955, houses kindergarten through grade six.

This school provides the facilities necessary to screen some curriculum and administrative innovations before they are considered by other elementary schools (currently 101) in Dade County. It further serves the purpose



COURTESY, DADE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS, FLORIDA

This school provides facilities for trying out some curriculum and administrative innovations.

of observation and limited participation on the part of students majoring in elementary education prior to their intern (student teaching) experiences.

The laboratory functions of the school are directed by a joint policy committee composed of three members from the university faculty appointed by the president of the university and three members from the Dade County Public Schools appointed by the superintendent of public instruction. The policy committee last fall solicited written proposals of innovative procedures from Dade County Schools personnel, university faculty members and the laboratory school staff. A composite of the proposals was sent back to the groups making the suggestions for their reaction, and a final list for current development was approved by the policy committee after considering these reactions. Subsequent proposals of innovative studies may be made to the policy committee by any of the groups concerned. Projects that are finally approved by the policy committee are referred for development to the laboratory school staff through the principal. These referrals include any necessary budget authorizations and directions

as to general procedures, length of time to be involved, kinds of evidence to be sought, and the nature of the report to be finally submitted to the policy committee.

#### ***Innovative Projects***

Projects that have been approved by the policy committee and are being developed by the laboratory school staff this first year include in addition to a double-session kindergarten (planned even before the school opened), experimentation with a summer program and in developing more effective home-school relationships. Brief descriptions of these projects follow.

***Kindergarten.*** The fact that kindergarten is not a part of public supported education in Dade County has been and is of considerable concern to many people. There has been neither classroom space nor necessary finances available to provide a kindergarten teacher for a group of twenty-five children. Since this ideal situation is not feasible at this time, the laboratory school is attempting to determine if a satisfactory kindergarten program can be carried out by one teacher and a full-time assistant for two groups of twenty-five children each. Whether the program is a satisfactory one will be determined in part at least by the kind of adjustment the group makes to first grade. In an effort to determine what is an effective length of a daily session in kindergarten, the one group attends a session of greater length than does the other. The decision as to the length of the kindergarten session will be made on the basis of whether one group seems to adjust better to first grade than the other and on the value

judgments of the teachers concerned.

***Summer Program.*** A second project approved by the joint policy committee is concerned with development of a summer program. This program will make possible for the first time visitation facilities for the summer session students at the University of Miami. In addition it will provide experimentation in a type of summer school program which might be offered to elementary school pupils in public school centers in the county. The length of term, length of the school day, and classification or grouping of pupils are factors that will be considered in the project.

***Home-School Relationships.*** The perennial problem of home-school relationships is the third area in which the laboratory school staff will attempt to develop some promising practices that will improve its own program and may be applicable in sister schools in the county. The project will be concerned with two aspects of the problem. The first is devoted to developing methods and techniques of conferencing with individual parents to better inform them of pupil progress and diagnose with them the cause of difficulties to aid further planning for their children.

The second aspect deals with involving parents in developing the total school program. Involved in this part of the project will be a study of the parent group to determine such factors as ethnic groups represented, economic status, educational levels, attitudes about child raising and education, and the kinds of experiences they provide their children outside of school. The survey will also determine special

abilities and talents possessed by parents to be recorded in a human resource file to be used throughout the school for the purpose of enriching and supplementing the instructional program. The survey will still further make an effort to determine the level of parents' understanding of the present program, their attitude toward the idea of parent involvement, and to ascertain what the parents feel are "needs" in the total program.

Other phases of the project will include inviting parents to join the staff in an in-service education class and to attend regularly scheduled teaching demonstrations. To provide opportunities for parents and teachers to meet within a framework that is vital and purposeful, a representative group of parents and the principal will organize general, sectional (K-3 and 4-6), grade, and room meetings around unmet needs or problems. It is planned that work committees will be an outgrowth of various meetings and that at the end of the year the whole approach will be evaluated in terms of changes that resulted in the program and in the understanding and attitude of the parents and staff.

Several other projects are being ex-

plored this spring as possibilities for eventual development. These include experimentation with the use of teacher aides, an intensive training program for fifth-year college students without adequate previous college work in elementary education, and a study of grouping in the classroom. Other projects have been proposed and will also be considered. As the policy committee and staff now see it, only those innovative studies which meet at least the following criteria will be approved and developed:

1. The study can be carried on satisfactorily under conditions of preservice teacher observation and limited participation.

2. The study promises possible improvement in the program of the laboratory school.

3. The study is of interest to other schools in Dade County and to the University of Miami.

These criteria, especially the first, rule out the basic research characteristic of the early laboratory schools but do permit use of the campus laboratory school as a first proving or screening ground for selected procedures. This we consider an important role to be played in a school system of this size.

---

### Conference on Core Teaching

The second regional conference on core teaching in the Washington, D. C., area (Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, and the District of Columbia) is scheduled for April 13 and 14 under the co-sponsorship of the George Washington University. The conference will open with a dinner meeting on Friday evening with Dr. William A. Van Til speaking on "Clarifying the Core Concept" and will continue on Saturday with a panel discussion and sectional meetings.

For further information about time, place, and program, write Mrs. Grace S. Wright, U. S. Office of Education, Washington 25, D. C.

Copyright © 1956 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.