

Role and function of

The Instructional Materials Center

AN educator's life is never dull and our lives have been filled of late with more than the usual number of explosions. The population explosion has filled our classrooms, and the explosion of knowledge has filled our waking hours. There has also been an explosive-like revolution in teaching methods and in the amount of material created for instructional purposes.

Aiding teachers and students in dealing with the flood of knowledge, assisting them in using the wealth of instructional aids now available, and helping them to employ effectively the methods and "hardware" of the new teaching technology is the function of an *instructional materials center*. The concept of a unified service including both library and audio-visual materials is receiving rapid acceptance among educators. Whether it is called "materials center," "curriculum laboratory," or "learning resources library," its purpose is to help create a richer learning environment through providing appropriate learning materials, experiences and resources.

What Is a Materials Center?

In materials centers all learning materials have equal status and receive con-

sideration. The collection may contain the whole range of materials used in teaching. Printed matter such as books, pamphlets, periodicals—audio-visual material such as slides, filmstrips, recordings and the equipment needed to use them are equally available to teachers and students. Free and inexpensive materials, charts, clippings, globes and maps are also included, as are the less common but useful items such as models, specimens, dioramas.

Some centers have equipment which may seem unusual but which makes sense because of the school's instructional program. Production of simple school-made instructional materials using photographic equipment and lettering devices often takes place in the center. Some materials centers in elementary schools have a sewing machine for use in making costumes for dramatizations and others have simple woodworking tools. Art supplies beyond those which are kept in each classroom are often a part of the center's collection.

Ideas, too, are part of the center. Bulletin board materials and suggestions, exhibit and display ideas, scripts, field trip and community resources files, and all manner of things which will make instruction more effective are housed in

the center. Professional books and periodicals as well as units of work and demonstration suggestions are also available.

The most important characteristic of an effective instructional materials center is its skilled staff. A mature, experienced, and creative professional person who enjoys helping teachers and students is the keystone of an effective program. Skill and knowledge in the total field of instructional materials are a necessity, as is a good understanding of child growth and development and principles of learning. Given adequate clerical help and funds, such a person can markedly influence teaching practices.

What a center contains and what services it offers depends on the type of school curriculum it serves. What is appropriate for one school may not be logical for a school of the same size in a nearby district. The purpose of a center is to improve instruction through service to teachers and pupils. Since each teacher, each building staff, and the needs of youngsters in each school are different, there should be variation in the program of service.

How Is a Materials Center Used?

Varied activities take place in a center. Teachers inquire about, order, preview or make the materials they need to do an effective teaching job. The materials specialist gives guidance in securing and using materials. Resource units and good ideas employed by other teachers are shared. Students ask for data for research purposes or for a practical project such as making a model. They secure information about resource people or field trips they might take. Administrators and curriculum people receive help in planning effective teachers' meetings or preparing

booklets or posters for public relations purposes.

At times a total class will come with a teacher to learn about research tools or to use the center's other resources. Often individuals and small groups will be at work finding information by examining printed or audio-visual materials. Materials and equipment are also taken from the center for classroom use.

In general two major types of activity go on in the center: (a) reading, listening to, and viewing of materials by teachers and students individually and in small groups; (b) teacher and pupil preparation of teaching aids such as graphs, charts and slides.

In the materials center the specialist is concerned with acquiring, organizing, housing and distributing the whole range of possible learning resources so as to enrich the learning environment of the school. Servicing and repair of materials and equipment are also the specialist's responsibility.

What Are the Advantages?

In order to do the kind of teaching job expected by the community, a teacher must utilize a wide variety of materials and approaches. Administrators and curriculum people can help teachers by providing a climate which enables them to be creative and to bring to bear all possible resources for the solution of an instructional problem. It is in the classroom where the effect of the "explosions" is felt. Teachers have always been busy people but now with the rapid increase in the numbers of children we must educate, an increasing emphasis on quality education, and the deluge of new knowl-

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edge and teaching materials, a comprehensive learning resources program is a necessity. It is more efficient and helpful for teachers to have one place to go for teaching materials rather than to visit separate library and audio-visual departments. The unified collection encourages better and more frequent use of the learning materials available.

It is widely recognized that each learner has a pattern and rhythm of growth which are unique. Providing the wide variety of learning experiences necessary to satisfy the different levels, abilities and interests is a challenge. A properly staffed and equipped materials center can have real impact on the problem of differing learning rates. Easy access by teachers and pupils to a wide variety of instructional materials and skilled guidance in the selection and use of these tools is necessary if we are to

have the type of education required by today's demands.

We talk about teaching the whole child. We know that the most effective learning experience is a natural and integrated one. Yet many schools have an artificial division of materials. When audio-visual services are separate from those in which teachers and students secure printed materials, it is more difficult to have a unified approach to satisfying an educational need. For example, a chart which could make a valuable contribution is printed, but it cannot be shelved like a book. Since it is not projected material or primarily pictorial in nature the audio-visual person does not feel it is his responsibility. The same may be said of free and inexpensive materials, flat pictures, realia and many other types of learning aids. Because of an artificial division of materials the purposes of education may not be served. A "no man's land" of materials for which no one feels responsible is often created. This cannot happen when a school is served by a unified collection under the direction of a skilled materials specialist.

A Building or System Center?

Materials should, of course, be as close to the consumer—the pupil or the teacher—as is practically possible. It would be best to have all materials in the classroom immediately at hand. Certainly as many as possible of the commonly used tools for learning should be kept in the classroom. Many maps, globes, and reference books should be always available. Materials and equipment not likely to be used continuously or on the spur of the moment, such as filmstrips, slides, and the necessary projection equipment, can be kept in the building instructional materials center.

Other items, less often used and too expensive to be placed in each school, can be stored in a system or area materials center. Such items as motion pictures, cased exhibits, and expensive models could be shared among several schools from a central location. Regardless of location, proper records of all equipment and materials owned by the district will assure that any teacher in the school system can obtain a needed item wherever it is housed.

How Can a Center Be Established?

Enthusiastic and skillful teachers have always collected materials to vitalize instruction. Students who have such teachers are fortunate. Not all teachers, however, are so dedicated. Many find the demands of their assignments so great that they have little energy left to collect necessary resources.

Every school has the beginning of an instructional materials center, because every school and most teachers have some library books and audio-visual resources. Usually there is no policy or plan to facilitate the sharing and use of these learning aids. Even a few materials and resources centrally located and under the direction of a service-minded person can serve the instructional program better than the same amount of material when it is scattered and uncoordinated. Once the idea of sharing learning resources is accepted by a faculty, many steps can be taken without a great expenditure of funds. Compilation of a picture file or list of community resources can enrich greatly the learning environment at little cost. Some of the most comprehensive instructional materials programs now in existence started with such a simple pooling of materials and ideas.

One school system which had self-contained elementary classrooms wished to establish and staff a materials center. When the staff members found it was not financially possible to hire a person to do this, they decided they were willing to have the number of children in their classrooms increased so as to free one of their skilled teachers to provide this service. Some formal and much on-the-job training prepared this teacher to implement the program they had envisioned. If the contribution of such a center can be understood, such services can be established even against great odds.

Most schools now have some separate and usually uncoordinated method of providing for audio-visual and library needs. Integrating these two services, while desirable, sometimes can be difficult because of the vested interests of individuals involved. Some librarians may be fearful of the rapidly growing audio-visual field. They may not feel comfortable with the new equipment and materials. In schools where the library is a teaching station or used to some degree as a study hall, it is difficult to take on a broader responsibility. Many audio-visual people do not wish to surrender their area of responsibility to librarians, nor do they wish to be under the librarian's direction.

As with all ideas which call for people to change their ways of working, skilled guidance and attention to the interpersonal aspects of the problem are necessary. Curriculum people have the responsibility and the skill to stimulate new methods of organizing curriculum services to assist teachers and thus improve instruction. An amalgamation of library and audio-visual services, when approached with skill and understanding, is such a step.

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