

## Looking at Centers for Learning Through Research-Colored Glasses

Lillian Spitzer

RESEARCH is badly needed on the changes taking place in school library services, particularly on the transformation of the familiar libraries into what we now call "Centers for Learning." Today it is not uncommon to find school construction plans including added expenditures for more ambitious school library facilities. Such facilities may consist of viewing-listening rooms, committee work areas, individual study carrels and the varied instructional materials and equipment needed to stock these areas. Both the public and the profession show high interest in developing these centers, obviously in the expectation that the extra monies, planning and effort will result in improved teaching and learning.

One may ask, though, what kind of evidence have we that these innovations in school plant and instructional materials actually enhance learning? Are there any scientifically determined research findings that define the elements that should be put together to create an optimum independent learning environment, which is what we want these centers to be? In terms of documented research, we find nothing definitive. However, we do have illuminated hunches and many expressions of a bright faith in the self-generative effect on learning which can be expected from

a truly democratic relationship between student, teacher and curriculum.

### Planning and Experimentation

National subsidies from public and private funds and foundations as well as federal grants have made possible much experimentation with methods, materials and facilities. "Money talks," and this factor has untied some of the strings which apparently hobbled creativity and flexibility in planning before this time. As an example, note the imaginative conception of facilities for independent study as depicted by Ralph E. Ellsworth and Hobart D. Wagener (1). They develop philosophically and graphically a modern concept for a school library as a teaching and learning laboratory—a system of team teaching with the teacher, librarian, and clerical assistants all aiding the student in the learning process. A glorious array of possibilities for environmental elements always finds the library in the center with the individual study carrel an integral part of the picture. The authors do not neglect the most modern "carriers" of knowledge even to the electronic transmission of information from a central storage bank to the individual carrel.

There is a readiness, a willingness,

even an eagerness on the part of school administrators and educators in general to experiment with new programs, unusual school plants, and new types of learning centers, all designed to encourage independent learning.

Instances can actually be cited where a complete changeover is taking place from graded classroom instruction to individualization of instruction. The Brigham Young University Laboratory School (2) is developing a continuous progress school where students move upward at their own rates, and where they spend 50 percent of their time in independent or semi-independent study. Much of the individual study will be done at a study station located adjacent to the Instructional Materials Center which will provide auto-instructional materials; study kits; video taped lessons and demonstrations; monaural tapes of lectures, speeches, foreign language les-

sons, and music; teaching machines; tutorial devices and a wide variety of reference books, periodicals and other reading materials.

Students in this school will be involved in planning, research, discussion and investigation. The teacher's role will change from that of lecturer to a director or guide to learning activities. He will direct students to references, to experimentation, to investigations, to pertinent materials, at whatever their level may be. Materials especially designed for independent use will be made available.

### A Research Center

In San Diego County plans have been prepared for a junior high school designed as a research center dealing with the teaching-learning environment of adolescents. The project envisions individual study spaces combined with



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workshop laboratories (with instructional materials) in two main centers—a Communication Arts Center and a Science-Mathematics Center—with a separate Instructional Materials Center designed to be a student-teacher resource-work-study area. Listening-viewing conference rooms and graphic arts space are planned to be a part of the materials center. One of the unique proposals for staffing the project is to have counseling curriculum psychologists working with teachers to implement the research design and to explore methods of translating outside and local research into the curriculum.

Some follow-up questions to "research" these experiments in teaching-learning processes might be:

1. Did evaluation take place to determine which of the various media is most effective to accomplish a particular task?

2. How appropriate were the materials used for the learners?

3. What basis is there for the use of study carrels? Do children learn better in isolation?

4. Did the teacher interact effectively with the child to insure motivation to learn independently?

5. Did teachers make certain that students gained ability to search out information?

An intermediate step in reorganization of the learning situation, not quite as far reaching as those mentioned here, is that of adding new materials and a cross media approach to the conventional school library. A program exemplifying this was described in *Educational Leadership*, April 1963, "Winnetka's Learning Laboratory," by Sidney P. Marland, Jr. The purpose, similar to aforementioned programs, is to create a setting for independent learning. A Ford Foundation sponsored project, a "Learning

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Center" at Shaker Heights, Ohio, is developing work study skills and independent study capabilities in elementary schools, grades 4-6 (3).

More gradual changes such as these offer the opportunity to find answers to questions such as the following:

1. Should it be the responsibility of the teacher or of the student to determine which of the educational media are most appropriate for the instructional activity at a given time?

2. Does increased time for self-study increase learning?

3. If the goal is development of independence in inquiry, what evidence is there to show the efficiency of learning centers in accomplishing this goal? Is it a more effective way to spend instructional time than some alternative way?

### Research Under Way

The only research study this writer could find pertaining to the contribution of a school library to the instructional program was instigated by Mary Gaver at Rutgers University (4). Instruments were devised to measure materials, accessibility, library-related activities, mastery of library skills, and amount and kind of reading done by children. This was done in the first phase of an on-going project which may, in its second phase, offer evidence to validate some of the bases upon which to build learning centers.

For further proposals, some of which may reveal related research findings, the American Association of School Librarians' *School Library Development Project News* is a helpful source of information on experiments in new kinds of school library service. Another source, although not specifically oriented to school libraries, is the Library Services

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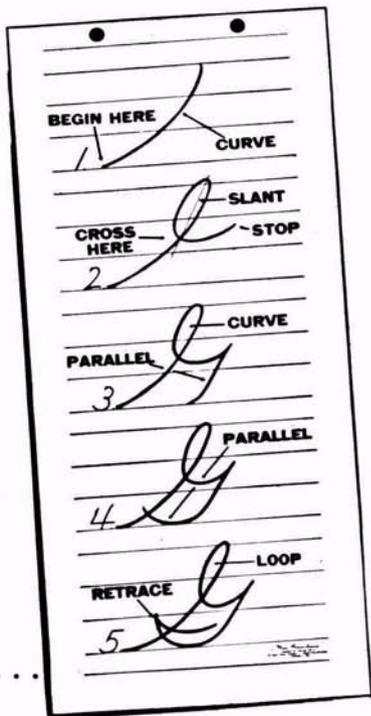
Traditionally the school library was the only place provided in the school for a student to work independently. With the instructional innovations emphasizing individualized instruction, self-instruction, and continuous progress plans, teachers and librarians are finding their tasks inextricably interwoven to insure successful independent learning. The teacher, on the one hand, becomes more fully aware of the total implications that materials of all kinds have for the learner. The librarian, on the other hand, becomes more deeply involved in the learning process, participating in curricular changes which depend heavily upon resources not only for information, but for learning how to learn and for developing a taste for learning.

It might be fruitful to examine the role of the teacher and the librarian in centers for learning. Carl Rogers, in his speech, "Learning To Be Free" (5), offers some pertinent suggestions to extend our thinking about this vital personal factor upon which no research could be found. (Let us assume that the librarian as well as the teacher is the referent in the following.) Rogers states that a very important function performed by a teacher who facilitates a "learning to be free" is the provision of resources, which is certainly a function of the librarian also.

Instead of organizing lesson plans and lectures, such a teacher concentrates on providing all kinds of relevant raw material for use by the student, together with clearly indicated channels by which the student can avail himself of these resources. I am thinking not only of the usual academic resources—books, workspaces, tools, maps, movies, recordings, and the like. I am also thinking of human resources—persons who might contribute to the knowledge of the student—the teacher himself as a resource. He makes himself and his special knowledge and experience clearly available to the students, but he does not impose himself on them. He outlines the particular ways in which he feels he is most competent, and they can call on him for anything he is able to give, but this is an offer of himself as a resource, and the degree to which he is used is up to the students.

Would this be impossible to test out? Not according to N. L. Gage (6) in the helpful *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, who believes, on the contrary, research effort should be directed toward closing the gap between the behavioral sciences and teaching. The teacher, as he sees it, is one of the "central variables" in research on teaching. To paraphrase the questions he poses in the light of our own problem:

What is the role of the librarian or director of the learning center? How does



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this role affect learning:

1. Mode of behavior:  
a keeper of books?  
a dispenser of information?  
a stimulator of use of resources?  
a guide to self-help?  
a catalyst?  
a listener?  
a resource?
2. Personality and characteristics:  
attitude  
intelligence  
knowledge of materials  
temperament  
authoritarian  
democratic  
open.
3. Instruments and media:  
teaching behavior exhibited by originator of material.

"Relevant variables" à la Gage might pose the question: What are the interaction variables affecting the learner?

librarian with student  
librarian with teacher of student  
student with teacher in library  
student with student in library.

It seems obvious that we need to test out what has been done already, sift out the most effective and promising practices, and set up models incorporating these features. But in our experimentation we need to look at the people involved in the learning process as well as the "things" of education. Webster's definition of "center" might serve well as a summing up:

"Center: A point around which things revolve, a focal point, area, person, or thing that is pivotal in relation to an indicated activity."

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#### The Child—Tozier

(Continued from page 226)

sistant principal, all supervisors, and the teachers, since it touches every area of the school. Schedules and lesson plans must be arranged to fit this kind of library program. Each activity must be purposeful, and this valuable space and professional time should never be wasted in "baby sitting" a group, no matter what the reason.

The superintendent and the school board must find money for materials, for personnel, and for abundant space. There should be at least the minimum library staff recommended by the American Library Association—that is, one full time professional librarian and one half-time clerk for each 300 children plus another half-time librarian and one-quarter more clerical assistance when the audio-visual materials are included. Staff shortages have long frustrated the most gallant attempts to give good school library service. It is like asking a principal, no matter how capable and hard working, to administer two, three or more

schools without professional or clerical help and do an effective, first class job.

#### Strong Leadership

The librarians must exert strong leadership, and be familiar with the teaching being done, if the instructional materials in the library are to be really integrated into the curriculum in each grade. The head librarian is charged with the responsibility for coordinating the use of instructional materials by all of the teachers and by all of the children, so perhaps he or she should be given the administrative power to perform these duties. Donald D. Durrell, of the School of Education of Boston University, has pointed out that librarians should have as much authority as assistant principals if they are to provide the effective library service expected of them. Some such arrangement seems inevitable.

The results, it appears to me, more than justify the greater effort and expense. A flexible schedule, allowing free and full use of the instructional materials in the library every day by teachers, classes and individuals is far more effective than random or arbitrary use, and makes the library a real center for learning. This goes a long way toward freeing a major portion of the curriculum from the narrow boundaries set by textbooks. When children are free to come to the library every day to exchange books, and to read or browse, they seem to be far more appreciative of the privilege they enjoy in their library. An effective "center for learning" type of library, not only offers strong nourishment to elementary education; it conditions the children during their impressionable years to the daily use of books and libraries, a habit which should remain with them throughout life.

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