

WINNETKA'S LEARNING LABORATORY

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WINNETKA'S Learning Laboratory, now in its third year of operation under partial support of the Fund for Advancement of Education, is located in a new addition to the Skokie Junior High School. It does not resemble a classroom; it does not look like the conventional laboratory. It has carrels for private study, but it also has specially designed furniture which can be arranged to accommodate small groups or large groups.

A visitor will find individuals and small groups at work. Headphones at their ears, several pupils are seated at soundproof booths listening to tapes. If an adult is present, he may, as often as not, be busy on his own, though available whenever needed. Sometimes there may be several adults working with children in various parts of the room, sometimes only children can be seen. Occasionally a child will get up and move into the adjacent library looking for information he needs. There is much movement, but little confusion. Children speak to each other freely, but there is little noise. It is hard for the visitor to believe that these are 11-, 12- and 13-year-olds.

Projects Encouraged

When the Winnetka Board of Education decided to explore the possibilities of a Learning Laboratory, the basic purpose was to determine whether junior high children are capable of independent study. Our project has gone far beyond our original thinking: we not only have a center where programs of independent study can be designed for individuals and small groups of children, but we also have a center where research pertinent to our school system is being carried on, and we have a curriculum resource center. Many of our classroom teachers have discovered new approaches to teaching and, in some instances, made dramatic changes in classroom procedures.

Teachers are now encouraging exploratory projects in the Learning Laboratory.

Previously this was nearly impossible because of time limitations, lack of centralized materials and facilities, and most of all, because no one was available to assist. As a result of some of these exploratory projects, there has been a reorganization in our mathematics program. Our new approach accepts the fact of human variability and utilizes the unique assets of each individual teacher. In some cases, mathematics is taught to one student; in other situations to seminar and multiple-class groups. Through the guidance of our mathematics consultant, we have cut across grade lines, both in grouping and in utilization of instructional materials. Our mathematics teachers, as never before, are looking critically at their classes and trying out new ideas. We have abandoned ability grouping and are developing a much more realistic and flexible grouping arrangement.

The Learning Laboratory allows us to test new approaches and techniques with a small group of students, make necessary revisions, try these in selected classes, and, ultimately, incorporate them into all classes. Most important, our mathematics program is becoming flexible enough to provide experiences for highly motivated students to continue beyond the prescribed goals of a class. Slower children are given special assistance in the laboratory and interested students find the means to carry on exploration there.

Our language-arts consultant has been responsible for the preparation of materials that have been used by students working in the laboratory. He has written a series of reading-creative writing units that can be used by individuals or small groups of children. His material covers the range from highly motivated students to students who need special remedial assistance.

Having these and other materials available, the Learning Laboratory can develop programs of study for individual children that the classroom teacher does not have the time, material or space to provide.

Facilities

Under the capable direction of the head of our foreign language department, we began experimenting in the laboratory with self-taught foreign language programs.

Programs in French, German, Spanish or Russian are available. Students work with tapes and accompanying written materials specially prepared for self-teaching. They use tape recorders equipped to record and play back their responses.

To implement the tape program, fluent lay adult conversationalists from the community meet with the students during a weekly activity period. They answer questions about the tapes and check children on the material they have studied. With the conversation leaders supplying encouragement, providing human interaction, prescribing goals, and evaluating progress, student interest and participation are kept high.

The Learning Laboratory assists teachers and children with special programs and special projects in the area of social studies. Programs where children work in small seminar groups under the leadership of a resource person selected from

the community Resource Talent Pool have been particularly successful and are in increasing demand.

Originally we thought that the Learning Laboratory would be the center for only those students who were highly motivated. We also thought that this would include only those students with high intelligence. During the course of our two years of operation, however, we found that high intelligence is not necessarily a good predictor of ability to do creative work on an independent study basis. And due to the organization of small study groups directed by adults, we have been able to include students in the Learning Laboratory who are not capable of studying independently.

Reporting

One of our major concerns was that of reporting back to teachers. We have worked out a series of forms that are filled out by the persons directing the students' study. A consultant, a classroom teacher, a person from the Resource Talent Pool, or the Director of the Learning Laboratory fills out an evaluation form. If several people are involved with the same child, they will add to the report. The final evaluation of a student's efforts is made by the teacher responsible for the child's referral on the basis of reports received from the Learning Laboratory and results of the study that have been brought back and shared with the class.

The time a child spends in the Learning Laboratory may vary from one period a week to three periods every day. Our plan is flexible. The teacher can change the schedule at a moment's notice.

The Learning Laboratory has expanded the role of our consultants. Before the development of the Learning Laboratory, they spent most of their time teaching for teachers. Consultants now work with individuals and small groups in the Learning Laboratory in addition to working in the classroom. Through this new program, they have been able to look much more critically at their specialties in relation to the overall curriculum.

To meet their responsibilities, the consultants need space and assistance: technicians to put their ideas into concrete visual form, a person to help develop research designs, a centralized location for developing materials, a center in which they can carry out their experiments and meet with children, and someone to catalogue and file instructional materials. This assistance is available to our consultants in the Learning Laboratory. As a result, they are developing more instructional aids, supplements to our curriculum, experimental projects, study programs for children, research projects, and in-service activities than ever before.

In addition to activities just described, the Learning Laboratory services and distributes tape recorders, record players, filmstrip viewers, filmstrip projectors, overhead projectors and opaque projectors.

The administrative assistant and the director catalogued all concrete instructional materials in the school and prepared a coded notebook with the appropriate information. In addition, we tabbed each teacher's *Curriculum Guide* with information as to available instructional aids for each unit in the *Guide*.

Two art teachers, taking part time from their regular assignments, are serving as resource technicians in the laboratory. The talents of these two people have been used to develop visuals for closed-circuit television and to produce instructional aids for teachers and consultants in all four Winnetka schools. The elementary schools are now making demands on the time of these two staff members. They have worked out a series of posters, overlays, number-lines and filmstrips for elementary school teachers.

We have initiated a materials exchange at Skokie by developing a file of teacher-prepared materials and arranging to distribute the creative efforts of one teacher to other teachers involved in the same general area. This has been quite successful, judged on the basis of the demands that we receive for copies of materials. Many of these documents will be useful in adding enrichment materials to our curriculum and providing ideas for changes in the basic curriculum structure.

Talent Pool

Last year we began to offer the services of volunteer mothers to assist teachers with clerical tasks. Their duties include typing curriculum materials, correcting papers and illustrating papers. They also assist with the mechanics of research projects and help to duplicate, catalogue and repair study materials.

The Winnetka Community Talent Pool is an agency which came into existence

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about the same time as the Learning Laboratory. This agency was an offshoot of the Senior Citizen program in our schools. The Talent Pool, however, has a membership that includes, not only the senior citizens, but other persons in the community with a talent or skill to share with others. The coordinator of this agency has done a skillful job in organizing this service.

From the Talent Pool we have been able to obtain the services of very outstanding people. They have worked with slower children in need of special academic assistance and with highly motivated students who need the guidance of a specialist in order to pursue their interest in depth.

A program known as "Project for Academic Motivation" was started six years ago in the Winnetka schools, in cooperation with the National College of Education under a grant from the Wieboldt Foundation. This project was in the hands of a very capable director.

The purpose of this study was to assist children whose academic potential was much greater than apparent from performance within the classroom by providing knowledgeable lay volunteers to work with them in an area of mutual interest. The volunteers were usually retirees who had been selected because of their interest in children, their unusual skill, and their ability to share their wisdom with young people. Since the program's inception, the director has expanded the program to include children not necessarily in need of motivational assistance and adult volunteers of all ages. This has led to a close working arrangement between the Learning Laboratory and the project director.

Research

The Learning Laboratory as a research center has been a consideration from the very beginning. Although our research center is very modest in its function, plans for its extension are under way. We believe that our center can provide the necessary link between research and the regular classroom.

We are doing some research in the use of teaching machines and programmed instruction. Our center has provided for cooperation between our school and an industrial research laboratory. Whenever taking "machines" into a classroom is difficult, we provide a laboratory setting. Once the machines show some promise, they are tried out in the classroom.

Research projects have been set up in the area of reading, foreign language, mathematics, and spelling. Each of these researches is bringing changes in our curriculum.

We in Winnetka are committed to experimentation and innovation. We want to retain the positive features of the traditional classroom and at the same time allow our Learning Laboratory to provide the space, encouragement, personnel and material to determine what changes must be made in order that our children will receive the best education possible. ☞

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