

Walker School's Interpretation of Educational Change

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THE first thing one notices as he watches children arrive at the Lulu Walker Elementary School is the way children tend to cluster at the yellow doors to chatter with obvious interest. This is the posting spot of today's schedule and each youngster eagerly scans the schedule—looking for times of his particular groupings.

Part of his day is spent with small groups and part with large groups. In addition he knows from yesterday's experiences when he will have independent study or individualized work. Some days he likes his schedule better than other days, but one thing he likes for sure—he knows he will have a different schedule each day.

Now in its fourth year of operation, the Lulu Walker Elementary School is the newest of the elementary schools in the Amphitheater District in the northern part of Tucson, Arizona. In this District during the past decade various committees and councils have worked on a philosophy of education, on broad basic educational goals, on assumptions about the teaching-learning process. There continues to be discussion on the *why* and *how* of education.

With this background it seemed timely to consider detailed preparation for planning facilities and program ideas that might bring the research on the teaching-learning process into the classes today.

The curriculum of present school programs was analyzed. District curriculum guides had been written and revised in earlier years and nongraded primary classes had been functioning almost seven years. A teacher-administrator committee met with University of Arizona consultants to study both behavioral sciences research and content areas of elementary and junior high schools.

As in previous years when a new school was being planned, maintenance men, teachers and administrators were asked to make suggestions for improved facilities. Large open spaces seemed to excite the imagination of the local educators and visits to other schools in the United States, coupled with study of the literature on the concepts of flexible space, produced long conversations with the architect. From these divergent sources the Lulu Walker School evolved.

Resource Use

Because of bonding capacity limitations, the school was built in two phases—the first half in 1963 and the second half the following year. Four large, open learning spaces with a focal point at one end are the basic classroom centers. There, flexible furniture, swing-out blackboards, interchangeable peg, chalk and tack boards fill the solid brick walls broken only by a few small windows near the ceiling to provide skyline vision. There are sinks and drinking fountains in each classroom. A teacher planning center contains a desk top, bookshelf and bulletin board, plus a file and rolling chair for each teacher. There are work tables for instructional clerks in this center and just adjacent is a large, open supply closet.

When the second phase of the plant was completed the following year, the Resource Center became the physical core as well as the school's psychological center. A large attractive reading room has a gold carpet furnished by parents and children in its center. Comfortable sofas and low magazine tables, small half-round tables and independent study desks surround it. One nook has Mexican chairs and the shelves in that area hold books in Spanish and Mexican artifacts to enjoy.

Three other areas are an integral part of the Resource Center—an independent study room with filmstrips, individual viewers and many kinds of free booklets. There is a listening room with tapes, recordings and mechanical equipment. A third portion is a workroom with counter space for model production, hot and cold water, vises on a work table, large storage spaces, pic-

ture files both mounted and unmounted for immediate consumption, and typewriter stations wired for self-instruction.

Rather than two large centers as in the first phase, the next classroom area is completely free of inner walls—108 feet of space to house social studies and science activities. Seven booths enable children to do additional kinds of projects with acid-resistant sinks and microscopes. Here is plenty of room for displays and projects to stimulate all children who enter—regardless of age or "grade."

A multipurpose building houses an indoor theater faced with a six-tiered demonstration area. Continuous benches and table tops make this a practical classroom where all the children can see and hear. A folding wall opens to the cafeteria and kitchen. A large outdoor theater with a grass-tiered amphitheater completes this unit.

The small administration building contains the usual offices plus a conference room for pupil-parent-teacher conferences.

Why a different kind of school? Our purpose was twofold: to provide a more stimulating learning climate for children and to make better use of teacher time and talent. Our children learn early that all persons have weak areas and all have some strengths. School is to identify these and help each child learn how to remedy his weaknesses and to develop his strengths.

Staff Assignment

Teachers choose the areas in which they feel they have strengths, thus specializing. Some teach a small portion of the school population and others meet

all children for some experiences. This does not limit a teacher's planning of opportunities utilizing other content areas and the teacher trained to teach all content areas functions best at Walker. It does, however, enable each teacher to study the new research in his specialty and therefore to provide greater depth for more children. Thus curriculum becomes a dynamic, local involvement of learning experiences that can flow as the factors of each situation are known.

A wide variety of materials, printed and mechanical are used by children and teachers. Children meet different approaches to problem solving, a variety of bulletin boards and displays, a fresh encounter following each chance to move physically from place to place. Each child's understandings are measured by various techniques rather than merely by his reading achievement in the formal reading circle.

We use a flexible form of team teaching. In planning sessions a variety of combinations will be involved, depending on the purposes. This means periodic general planning sessions but not a daily detailed session for the entire faculty. Teachers choose the individuals or groupings they desire to meet on the following day, with the amount of time preferred and a schedule clerk puts these persons into a space and time of day. Teachers are free to handle their three professional responsibilities—diagnosis, planning experiences with children, and evaluating these experiences. They are free to choose when to work with children and when to plan or to attend a conference. Instructional clerks handle the clerical, technical and housekeeping activities that normally

accompany learning experiences. Parents have also been very much involved in supportive activities.

During the preliminary planning some concern was voiced for an identification figure. In the upper bloc (third year and above) each child may choose any adult in the school with whom he feels he can relate when he has a problem at school or a worry at the bus stop that needs to be shared. We call this program our "4T" (teacher-to-talk-to). When a teacher seems to be relatively unsuccessful in communicating with a child, he seeks out the child's 4T and together they try to find a way to reestablish the communication lines.

A Student Council is composed of representatives from second through sixth year. This year the council wrote a handbook to guide present and new students in Walker School ways.

Each spring the sixth year children participate in one week of Outdoor Education activities. Directed classroom work precedes the week of camping so that much of the outdoor education program is planned, organized and evaluated by the youngsters themselves. Walker parents have worked on the campsite to pay rent each year.

This year Walker School is affiliated with the Kettering Foundation, through which we are exploring a new kind of educational position—"Director of In-Service Education and Evaluation."

All the old has not been discarded; all the new has not been adopted. Walker School claims no spectacular results, but in this school you can find a climate for openness, a flowing process designed to move toward the self-actualization of every child or adult who enters its doors. ☞

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