

LET'S CLOSE THE FACTORY!

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FOR a number of years we have been operating an information retrieval service for our students and teachers. We have no computers, facsimile transmission, special grants or funded programs. It simply means that any teacher or librarian in the Toronto schools may phone the Board's central library for a thorough search for information required by themselves or their students. Over 25,000 requests a year are received by the central library. More than a dozen professional librarians and twice as many clerks send out articles, reports and books in response to these requests.

The library department is located in the curriculum center and administration building. A central staff of over eighty is responsible for the libraries in over 130 elementary and secondary schools; central ordering, cataloging and processing; and the central library and information retrieval and dissemination services. There is a library and librarian in every elementary and secondary school but no secondary school has less than 1.5 librarians and some have three.

The professional writers in the Docu-

mentation section of the library prepare reports on educational topics and issue a variety of publications including reviews of professional literature and tables of contents of hundreds of periodicals from which complete articles can be ordered. The central library subscribes to over 3,000 periodicals. The information services to students began in 1963 and now reach most of our 30,000 secondary school students. The elementary schools are gradually increasing their use of the service and this year we are having some students phone the central library directly from their classroom (or from their home until 9 p.m.)—and these students getting direct service for the first time are in the 7th and 8th grades.

This program is well known and disliked by many school librarians in the U.S., yet it is in tune with the direction education has taken. It facilitates independent student work in a mass education setting. It helps to avoid a hardening of the curriculum and continually keeps teachers in touch with current information in their field. It allows students to spend their time and energy working with information rather than

overcoming library obstacles in trying to find it.

In the educational sense of the term, the student becomes the real searcher. Once he has on his desk Xerox copies of articles, books, etc., which apply to his specific question then he must search for the pattern, the sense, which emerges from the materials for an understanding of his topic. A widespread program of this kind would help free students from being dependent on residence or variations in teacher excellence for the quality and variety of information at their command.

No More Mickey Mouse

The insistence of many in authority today that students must find their own information is frequently based on expediency, reflecting the outlook of the librarians rather than the needs of the students. Function is being defined not by purpose but by the operational requirements of the institution.

Library skills, as taught in terms of the card catalog, encyclopedias, and the *Readers' Guide*, not only give the student a false sense of adequacy but limit his awareness of today's information problems. It takes from six months to a year to train an experienced and competent professional to work effectively in any department of a major library. Even then, the librarian is effective in obtaining information in his department in his library only. For effective use of another department and certainly of other libraries he must depend on another professional.

What happens in many schools is that the student picks up a relatively useless and non-transferable bag of tricks and is placed in the position where mutila-

tion, theft or plagiarizing of library material may be profitable. If we want the student to know how to get information efficiently today, we must train him in modern information organization.

Our secondary school students start with more reading and other material than many university students end up with. Young people work harder in this program than they would in the traditional plan. They have access to more material and to material of higher quality and they are literally awakened by what they receive. They had not realized the extent and the variety of the sources of information. One result of our program is that the quality of the work of a number of students receiving this service far exceeds any previous work done by equivalent groups.

We made two discoveries in our program. One was that public school students require an information service of a sophistication equal to that provided for professional groups. The second was that a school library, regardless of size, cannot rely on its own resources but must be linked to an information network.

A Responsive Environment

It is my opinion that this is more than a plan to improve school libraries. It is an attempt to provide an environment where learning can take place. It is my hope that at least one community might condemn and declare its schools to be illegal. A serious time lag exists between schools and new concepts in education because our present organization is incompatible with mid-century society and technology.

Public schools and public libraries performed miracles in the first half of

this century but if they continue as they are at present, it will take a miracle for them to achieve success in the second half. Our young children observe the migratory and courting habits of birds, circumnavigate the world and go into space before they enter kindergarten. A growing difference between our generation and our children's is that we saw our school as a universe of information, a mystery box requiring us to find the right key; our children, however, are in themselves centers of information universes. A curriculum for these children is their own search for curriculum. A school for these children is an environment responsive to their search.

As our world becomes smaller and less compartmentalized, our solutions in education will be environmental. Not separate solutions in separate departments but community solutions for all to use and responsible to all. First, look at the individual, his society and his technology; second, reconstruct schools in the form of a responsive environment.

Not an Answer, But a Test

Let us take one community and replace the public school and the public library with a *resource center*: a place where people can read, or work with their hands. A child may work with a microscope, a flute, a hammer or a computer. He may build a weather station or invent new games. He can browse through a rich collection of books, watch films in the privacy of a study carrel or have the librarian get him any information he may need. There would be storytelling and plays and perhaps a newspaper office.

"There are children playing in the street who could solve some of my top problems in physics," said Robert Oppenheimer, "because they have modes of sensory perception that I lost long ago." The resource center is an environment in which children become participants in discovery.

Underlying the flexibility of this center is the possibility that information may become an electric utility reaching into homes with film discs and telephone-computer circuits. The center can also extend itself with mobile units or special branches set up and knocked down in response to community requirements. As a side advantage, the resource center resolves the question of school library and public library duplication.

In proposing a resource center for all ages to replace both public school and public library, I am not suggesting an answer but a test of hypotheses: that the major job of our society—education—cannot be fragmented by institution, by institutionalized curricula or by institutional categorization of people; that education, to be consistent with our society and with our technology, can be tailored for the individual; that education requires total information resources and the services of a variety of professionals and craftsmen; and that success in education rests on free, not compulsory, activity.

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