

## **Project Discovery: at Mercer School**

**RICHARD L. HAWK**

Coordinator, Instructional Aids

Edmonds School District, Lynnwood, Washington

THOSE of us in public education work toward a number of ultimate goals which we may or may not be able to describe in some detail. We may be able to describe the ultimate school building, class load, knowledge of pupil behavior, collection of instructional materials, or we may work toward some such aims with no final goal that we can describe with any sort of certainty. The "audio-visualist" has his dream along with every other specialty field in education. He would have all sorts of equipment and materials at the teacher's fingertips, with the teacher highly skilled in the proper use of such tools.

Thanks to a joint effort of Encyclopedia Britannica Educational Corporation, the Bell & Howell Company, several other firms, and governmental money, an example of such a utopian ultimate in the form of Project Discovery has been provided at four locations throughout the nation. This observer was privileged to spend two days at the installation at Mercer Elementary School in Shaker Heights, Ohio.

### **At Mercer School**

At Mercer School, Project Discovery consists of (a) a motion picture projector and filmstrip projector on a cart in each classroom, in which a 70 inch projection screen is mounted on a rod hung across one corner of the room, and (b) a collection of nearly 700 motion pictures and 1300 filmstrips in the library. The significance of this exploratory program comes not simply from the fact of the presence of all the equipment and materials, but how these additions have been fitted into a school program which was already rich in staffing other forms of hardware and software, and in community support.

Four years ago Mercer School, and all the schools of Shaker Heights, were enjoying an average of a little more than 20 students per teacher. In addition, each elementary school had specialists in art, music, physical education, and foreign languages. This remarkable teaching staff was backed by an equally impressive central office and school administration and specialty staff. The school libraries

were already bursting at the seams, and other forms of teaching materials and supplies were plentiful—except that area generally identified as “audio-visual.” This latter aspect of the program was remarkably out of step. Films came to the building for only one-half day each week, with most of the classes coming together to the school auditorium where they all would enjoy the “movies.”

Such a situation was ripe for adjustment. Three years ago Project Discovery came to Mercer School and a centralized audio-visual program was inaugurated in the Shaker Heights School District. Both programs have had an apparent impact upon teachers and program. All of a sudden “audio-visual” is “in” at Shaker Heights.

Project Discovery has had a remarkable impact upon the staff and students alike at Mercer. Before elaborating upon specifics, some related conditions must be described.

1. The very favorable pupil-teacher ratio coupled with the presence of both a principal and an assistant (in a 704 pupil school), a high level of clerk and custodial time augmented by much volunteer help from mothers, and specialized assistance from the central office (especially in the area of personnel services) make possible a professional atmosphere rich in emphasis upon the individual learner and teacher competence.

2. Shaker Heights is an upper class eastern community. The children who attend the Shaker Heights Schools generally have a better-than-average background of experiences.

3. The wealth of materials and time to teach has produced a corps of teachers who operate within an extremely detailed plan of operation, both in the school and in the classroom. Everywhere it was possible to see this dedication to detail. One aspect is a fierce pride on the part of each teacher in how he or she goes about teaching a given lesson or topic.

4. In 1956, B. F. Skinner wrote that one of the most serious problems in education was the limited number of reinforcing experiences which could be provided each learner. His answer to this problem was the use of programmed learning materials. At Mercer School the answer is reinforcement through the almost tutorial relationship among learners and their teachers. This observer never ceased to be amazed by the frequency of comments of praise given children for their achievements. The opportunities for each child to “star” in some group activity appeared frequently. This observer saw no acts of reprimand or coercion, but heard constant words of commendation and acknowledgments of achievement.

## **Some Observations**

The basic question this observer sought to answer was this: What happens to a school student body and staff who already seem to have everything except an accelerated audio-visual program when one is provided them as a product of very little preparatory effort on their own part, and where the entire nation is watching to see what happens? An answer, of necessity, has several parts:

1. Because of the novelty and "national showcase" effects, there is a high degree of favorable feeling toward the program. With the same intensity that they attack other phases of the instructional program, the Mercer teaching staff has sought ways to make maximum use of the resources they have been given. Films and filmstrips appear in every subject and grade level. Because such materials tend to contribute most to the goals of the elementary school in social studies and science, the materials collections favor those areas, and actual use parallels such inventory emphases.

2. In spite of the wealth of materials of all types, the film and filmstrip utilization by both teachers and students remains exceptionally high. Library book circulation has increased out of proportion to school growth. The circulation mirrors subject emphasis in the film and filmstrip collection.

3. In spite of a growing collection of similar materials at the district level, as well as all of the other materials available for their use, the teachers at Mercer feel very strongly that they do not want to give up the Project Discovery facilities once the experiment is concluded (at the end of the school year 1967-68).

Going beyond a basic appraisal of the program, it was easy to see that the teachers at Mercer School have learned skills in the utilization of films and filmstrips which definitely go further than those attained by most teachers. The les-





sons making use of a variety of media which would be unusual investments of effort and planning for most teachers are everyday occurrences at Mercer. Usually only a few frames of a filmstrip were used, and then as supportive to other media in a lesson. Children were observed viewing complete filmstrips and some of them checked out filmstrips to take home probably for total viewing.

The single-frame projection capability of the Bell & Howell #552 in each teacher's classroom came in for more use than was expected. No film was shown in its entirety with no interruptions. The teachers have become highly skilled at breaking in at appropriate moments to ensure that the showing will be adapted to purposes of the lesson. It was apparent that successful interruptions were the product of a thorough knowledge of the film: where the good break-in points are, what concepts need further elaboration by the teacher, when is the right moment to tie together other class activities and film content. It was also apparent that such interruptions could be damaging to the carefully contrived sequencing of ideas presented in a film if they were simply the whim of the teacher at the moment. The successful interruptions were obviously preplanned.

Each teacher at Mercer School has a complete set of guides for each film in the building. In addition, there is a complete set on file with the films in the library, and a guide is kept in each film can. Only those teachers who have numbered and organized each film guide make much use of their personal sets.

Probably the most spectacular trend at Mercer School from the point of view of this observer is the relationship between film and filmstrip use and the non-coercive, reward-oriented environment in most classrooms. In an atmosphere where film viewing does not need to function as a release from oppression; where alert and active viewing is likely to result in a special acknowledgment of some sort, these forms of instructional media truly are emancipated from the role of sense-pacifying "movies" or "picture shows." They can begin to fulfill the promise of providing highly efficient sources of stimulus materials which can keep up with the increasing demands of a burgeoning educational technology. ☛

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