

# A Major Role for Laboratory Schools

FELICIA WEST\*

THOMAS GADSDEN, JR.

**T**HE very existence of laboratory schools is seriously threatened. Yet laboratory schools hold a great potential for examining and solving some of the most difficult problems faced in the attempt to improve educational practice. The instructional activities of the classroom teacher are becoming increasingly disjoint from the theory espoused in colleges of education.

University professors are accused of living in isolation from reality. Practicing teachers are criticized for operating without regard for current educational theory and research, and for becoming trapped and stagnant as they deal with the everyday problems of the realistic classroom. As one listens to educators express their views on ways of dealing with the process of education, one frequently finds that they are considering the problem in relation to one individual, while the practicing classroom teacher must deal with many individuals simultaneously. On the other hand, the classroom teacher is continuously in danger of dealing with the class as a unit and overlooking the individuality of each student.

## Role of the Laboratory Schools

Historically, the role of the laboratory school has been to assist in the training of new teachers and the demonstration of exemplary teaching techniques. Today the role

is changing. Many laboratory schools are becoming centers for educational research and are truly serving as laboratories for the testing of educational theory. However, the necessity for a third role is becoming increasingly apparent. The laboratory school must also serve as a translator between theory and reality.

Laboratory schools are in an ideal position to circumvent the communications breakdown between the theorist and the realist in education. The laboratory school's unique relationship with a college of education and a university in general provides a wide range of resources. Through this relationship, current research data from sources such as the educational libraries, ERIC Information Centers, interlibrary loan services, other faculty members, and research associations are readily accessible. Contacts with publishers, other laboratory schools, and representatives from innovative schools in other geographical areas provide opportunities to become acquainted with developing programs.

Laboratory school faculties are in a desirable position to maintain awareness and

\* Felicia West, Research Associate, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington, D.C.; and Thomas Gadsden, Jr., Assistant Professor of Education, P. K. Yonge Laboratory School, University of Florida, Gainesville

understanding of current problems in education through state and national conference participation and visitation to schools. Constant interchange of ideas between laboratory school and university faculties maintains a high level of familiarity with promising trends in educational theory. In addition, there exists the unique opportunity for laboratory school faculties to challenge the educational theorist directly concerning the practicability of his theory, on the basis of the faculty's continued involvement in the day-to-day problems of teaching. On the other hand, continual involvement with the more theoretical orientation of the university faculty provides a basis for raising realistic questions about the day-to-day practices of the public school teacher.

This unique relationship exists in part because laboratory schools maintain a faculty with an exceptionally high level of professional preparation. Laboratory school faculty members, in addition to being exemplary teachers, must possess competencies not always considered necessary for the average classroom teacher. Laboratory school faculty members are able to relate to disciplines other than their own and to seek points of commonality that exist between disciplines. They have had the varied experiences that enable them to relate to teachers and students at numerous age levels.

Their academic preparation in their fields of specialization is especially strong, so that they can participate actively in curriculum development. Their sound preparation in educational philosophy and theory enables them to act as an intermediate link in the chain of communication between colleges of education and practicing teachers. Their understanding of processes of research can help make the laboratory school a major center for research, which, concomitant with curriculum development, is a means of translating theory into reality. Finally, the willingness of laboratory school teachers to question both the theory of the educator and the problems and excuses of the classroom teacher provides the impetus to undertake this task of translation.

The structure and operation of the lab-

oratory school are also uniquely suited for this suggested extension of its role. It generally operates outside the realm of community political influence, thus promoting its freedom to innovate and to challenge questionable educational practices without unreasonable restraint. The enrolled student bodies of laboratory schools are available to serve as research populations; this type of involvement is not always desired by local school systems. Flexibilities exhibited in curricula, faculty roles, schedules, students, plant facilities, and administrators contribute to an atmosphere of freedom and challenge.

Finally, the laboratory school disseminates a variety of materials valuable to school systems in widespread geographical areas. The integration of all of these characteristics of a laboratory school and its faculty produces a setting conducive to the acceptance and implementation of this new role of translation between theory and reality.

## **Implementation**

How does the laboratory school accomplish the task of translation? Such a task can be accomplished through a combination and integration of several activities. These activities include the following:

1. Identification of current problems through visitation by laboratory school personnel with other schools. This activity provides impetus for relevant research at the laboratory school as well as serving as a source of information for university professors concerning the realities of classroom teaching. It must be emphasized that these visits are not judgmental, but are concerned solely with information gathering.
2. Presentation of a continuing series of seminars for the purpose of exchanging ideas between laboratory school faculty and university professors. Implied in this activity is the opportunity for an open discussion of the ideas expressed.
3. Communication with county coordinators. This activity results in the identification of additional problems and opens up channels of communication with specialized personnel

whose duties are closely related to the practicing teachers and to the laboratory school.

4. Operation of the laboratory school on a year-round basis. This arrangement permits extended visits to the laboratory school by teachers from other schools and permits extended consultation of laboratory school faculties in the public schools.

5. Interchange between members of student bodies. Student involvement in identification of problems as well as in suggested solutions is encouraged through such an exchange.

6. Dissemination of information and materials. Publications are produced and distributed by the laboratory schools on a regular basis to share successful and unsuccessful experiences as well as to discourage duplication of effort. This activity includes the distribution and sharing of new materials and approaches, the results of research, and information on the application of educational theory in the classroom.

7. Development of a Faculty Resource Data Bank. This data bank consists of a listing of laboratory school faculty members with their specific competencies. It describes in detail faculty skills and expertise in many areas. Schools and school systems desiring assistance can refer to the data bank to determine what services are available through the laboratory school and to obtain a list of potential consultants capable of providing this assistance.

8. Availability of faculty members to act as consultants. Through this activity the laboratory school faculty serves in a judgmental capacity and plays a more direct role in altering teacher practices.

9. Involvement and cooperation with public schools in activities such as writing proposals, developing materials, sharing ideas, and testing out new approaches after initial testing by the laboratory school. With such involvement, laboratory school personnel with specific skills are available temporarily to school systems at little or no cost.

10. Utilization of retired university specialists. Retired professors from the university serve as consultants to the faculty and as liaison between the laboratory school and the college of education.

11. Cooperative projects and dual ap-

pointments. Cooperative research projects are undertaken which involve the faculties and students of both the laboratory school and the university. Such an arrangement tends to maintain a realistic approach to the research so that utilization by public school teachers is more likely. In the same manner, dual appointments serve to keep the theorist's feet on the ground and to continually challenge the associated teachers to consider new alternatives.

Informally, P. K. Yonge Laboratory School of the University of Florida has moved forward through implementation of several of the activities suggested.

There has been increased visitation from other schools to discuss problems. Especially successful has been the "Drive-in Conference," a one-day conference centered on a particular teaching problem or approach, yet open to free exchange of ideas on any educational topic. A second method of assessing the needs of public schools that has been utilized successfully by the laboratory school has been the questionnaire survey method.

P. K. Yonge is presently sponsoring a series of weekly seminars in which research in progress in the laboratory school is shared and discussed with the university community, and members of the university community present ideas for consideration and reaction from the P. K. Yonge faculty.

Within a limited budget, as many faculty members as possible are employed in the summer and given the opportunity to function more fully in the translator role. An extended school year for students in middle school has been attempted, while other levels of the school are working toward continuous operation so that the release of faculty members for extended consultation with public schools can more easily occur during any portion of the year.

Many members at P. K. Yonge have appointments that are for part-time instruction and part-time research. This also provides more freedom and opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and reality.

The exchange of student bodies between P. K. Yonge and other schools has occurred on a limited basis only, but even this has provided new insights into our operation.

Due to limited funds, there was previously very little dissemination of information and materials from P. K. Yonge. Now, in addition to a number of brochures, P. K. Yonge has instituted a research monograph series that is distributed to every school in Florida. Publication of the monographs is only now becoming a regular activity, but already the response has been overwhelming.

Several faculty members are presently in the process of developing a questionnaire to determine the competencies of each faculty member of P. K. Yonge. This information will become the nucleus of a resource data bank.

In conjunction with the development of materials in several areas, public schools have assisted or will assist in field testing, revision, and the actual writing of many materials and approaches. This has been accomplished through participation in Drive-in Conferences, cross visitation, mail and telephone communication, and discussion seminars at state and regional conferences.

At P. K. Yonge, Professor Emeritus N. E. Bingham from science education has served in an informal capacity as a readily available consultant as well as being actively involved in classroom teaching at all grade levels in the school. Recently, Dean Emeritus J. B. White also joined the P. K. Yonge Laboratory School as a consultant in research and development. In return, P. K. Yonge has provided office space, secretarial help, mini-

mal financial rewards, a never-ending supply of hopefully satisfying experiences, and the sincere appreciation of the faculty.

Three people at the laboratory school share dual appointments between P. K. Yonge and the College of Education. Two are university professors deeply involved in research at P. K. Yonge, while the third is a P. K. Yonge professor who teaches methods classes within the college of education.

A number of laboratory school-university cooperative projects are under way at this time. These include development of an instrument to assess self-concept, a study involving the use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Instrument, implementation of the British Common School Concept, the development of an observational instrument for the social sciences, and others.

In conclusion, we must emphasize that, if education is to profit from the experiences of the classroom teacher as well as from the theory and research of the university professor, then someone in the educational system must perform the function of translation. At present, laboratory schools seem to be best suited to complete the chain from theory into reality.

Enthusiasm shown by public schools in response to the beginning efforts made by P. K. Yonge Laboratory School in this direction clearly provides support for such a role. □

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