

A Commitment to Achievement: Detroit's Neighborhood Educational Project

Author(s): Faith T. Murdoch

Source: *American Libraries*, Vol. 1, No. 8 (Sep., 1970), pp. 758-761

Published by: American Library Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25618027>

Accessed: 29-07-2017 22:37 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



American Library Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Libraries*

FAITH T. MURDOCH



A COMMITMENT TO ACHIEVEMENT

ONE OF THE ironies of this age of space exploration, with its dramatic technological advances and its constantly broadening horizons, is that it is also an age of limited reading ability. For every gifted student who reaches out beyond the beyond, there are thousands who rebel because they cannot communicate. Frustrations bred of inability to translate the printed image have resulted in hostility, rebellion, and eventually, rejection of educational institutions, including libraries.

Urban areas, where a multiplicity of abrasive problems have heightened tensions, are particularly vulnerable. What efforts are being made in the large cities to meet the needs of communities where a lack of basic language skills threatens to trigger continued trouble? Detroit, along with other major cities, is seeking answers.

Following the major social upheaval in Detroit in the summer of 1967, concerned citizens in every sector of the

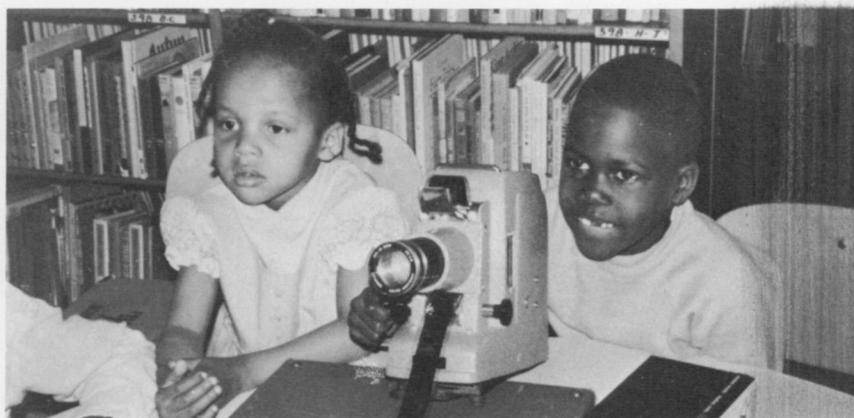
community began diagnosing the city's ills. Committees burgeoned, studies proliferated, frustrations multiplied. A prestigious group of community leaders organized The New Detroit Committee to seek a way out of the morass of urban problems which beset the city. More than two years and dozens of studies later, no dramatic successes may be reported, no simple solutions offered. However, there is general agreement among all of the investigating bodies that education is a key factor in working toward solutions for the city's economic and social sickness; the level which can raise the socioeconomic status of individuals in disadvantaged areas; the one positive agent in the upward mobility of a people who have long been on the lowest step of the ladder to productive citizenship.

Profiting by their experience with failures and successes in previous programs, the Special Projects staff of the Detroit Public Schools designed a

proposal, early in 1968, predicated on the need for a saturation effort. This unique program, titled The Neighborhood Education Center (NEC), was funded under ESEA, Title III, in March 1968.

In announcing the grant to the Detroit Board of Education, Dr. Norman Drachler, superintendent of schools, stated that the grant of \$6,000,000, for a period of three years, was the largest single grant thus far awarded to a school district under Title III. Dr. Drachler commented, "the NEC grant reflects an increasing determination by both federal and city officials to focus money sharply on a limited number of disadvantaged children. When federal money is spread over a large number of children as it has been in the past, we can at best produce excellent models, but we cannot expect to produce great academic gains. Now, for the first time, federal funds are being used by educators to find how much it will

DETROIT'S NEIGHBORHOOD EDUCATIONAL PROJECT



cost to move disadvantaged children in a target area into the range of scholastic achievement."

The six schools designated to participate in the NEC Project are located in a depressed area of the city on the fringes of a slum clearance project. The neighborhood is marked by typical evidences of urban blight—vacant property on which litter has accumulated, substandard housing, deserted business places, and a general air of neglect. The area is racially integrated, but the student enrollment is predominantly black. There are some 5,000 pupils enrolled in the six member schools of the NEC, which include four elementary schools, a junior high, and a senior high school.

Since the central aim of the NEC is to raise academic achievement levels of K-6 grade students in language arts and computational skills, a large percentage of the funds allocated to the Project has been designated to saturate elementary pupils with enriched, innovative, and reexamined experiences.

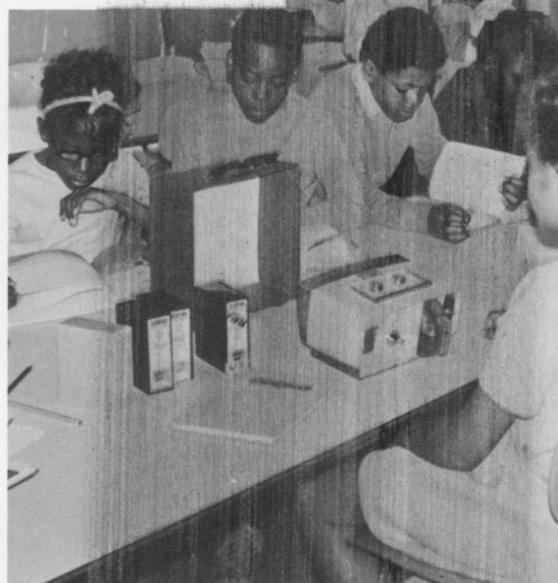
The primary objective of the NEC Project is to raise achievement levels on standard tests in language arts and mathematical skills to grade level or above. In pursuit of this lofty goal, teachers and administrators have pledged that each child in the Project will make a statistically significant gain in academic achievement in the three years allotted. A worthy answer to Commissioner Allen's "Right To Read" challenge!

The first major step in implementing this ambitious undertaking was to recruit teachers who believed that attainment of the objective was possible. Only teachers who had had experience in inner-city schools were considered, and only those who showed enthusiasm for the Project were selected. As a result, the NEC is manned by a staff of highly moti-

vated, experienced teachers who are dedicated to raising the achievement level of each child—a formidable assignment in any school situation, but particularly challenging in these schools where the achievement level on standard tests is far below the national average.

During the summer of 1968, workshops were conducted to prepare the staff for the challenges which awaited them in September, and to familiarize them with the educational design which had been prepared for the NEC by a team of experts, with Dr. Ralph Tyler as chief consultant. Leaders in education, psychology, sociology, human relations, and other related fields served as discussion leaders and consultants in the daily workshops. The director of the Project, a young, enthusiastic educator, Dr. Hugh Scott, provides the on-going aggressive leadership which is essential to the success of the program.

Innovations introduced during the training sessions centered largely on individualized instruction. A general curriculum plan was developed for the elementary schools which provides diagnostic and prescriptive assistance for each learner. A team of teachers identifies the skills which each pupil possesses, the steps the pupil must take to acquire the additional skills, and the materials and experiences which will enable him to take the steps successfully. Each pupil is expected to proceed at his own rate in the development of skills in which he is deficient, rather than to progress at a rate that has been established for all pupils. Lessons



are planned sequentially from the simplest to the more difficult. It is a logical order of learning experiences in which each experience is related to and dependent upon the preceding step.

"Prescriptions" in each subject area have been developed by the staff to fit individuals, so that no grade levels are attached. For example, in Oral Language, the simplest prescription: "In answer to the question, 'What is your name?' the learner will say both his first and last names." One of the last, or most difficult Oral Language prescriptions: "The learner will transmit, record, or deliver orally before an audience his own three minute radio script about a specific topic."

In a similar manner, lessons or prescriptions have been developed for Written Language and Study Skills, and for the Computational Skills, from the simplest exercise to logic, integers, and probability for the most advanced pupils.

While the four teachers in each cluster diagnose the needs of their pupils and work with them through



the learning sequences for language and mathematics, specialists in art, health, music, performing arts, and science meet the pupils in each cluster on a regular basis, so that these special areas are not neglected in the overall plan of the NEC.

The project has some unique features which greatly enhance the program:

Team Teaching. Each team consists of four teachers for each sixty-six pupils, housed in three classrooms, identified as "clusters." Each cluster meets twice a week for a planning session with the curricular assistant principals. These planning periods are in addition to the three coordinating (preparation) periods recommended for each teacher in the Detroit teachers' contract.

Curricular Assistant Principals. This is a new position created for the NEC Project and since adopted by some other Detroit elementary schools. Two curricular assistant principals have been assigned to each of the four elementary schools in the NEC. Relieved of Administrative chores, their responsibility is solely in the area of curriculum. They work with teachers individually and in the clusters, to

interpret the innovative curriculum approaches designed for the Project, to create new approaches, and to assist all teachers as the need arises with problems connected with instruction.

Reduction in Class Size. Title III funds have also made it possible to reduce class size from thirty-four, the usual average for Detroit elementary schools, to twenty-two per classroom, with an additional teacher for every three classrooms. In order to house the extra classes created, transportable buildings were added to each school site.

In-Service Training. Fundamental to the success of the Project is the continuous involvement of the teaching staff and the administrators in regularly scheduled training sessions. Workshops and other forms of in-service education are scheduled during regular school hours, after school, on Saturdays, and during the summer months. Workshops provide opportunities for visitation in the NEC community, and to schools, universities, and other pertinent sources of information; for training in teaming and group dynamics; for investigating new trends, techniques, and materials in

various subject areas; for designing materials for individualization of instruction.

Evaluation. Evaluation of activities in the NEC is being carried out by the Research and Development Department of the Detroit Public Schools and a private corporation, The American Institute for Research (AIR). The contracted agent, AIR, is to provide a report at the end of each year of the Project and a summary report at the end of the three-year period.

Community Involvement. As the name implies, The Neighborhood Educational Center Project involves the total school community. Each school in the NEC has a duly elected body of community representatives in the form of a Neighborhood Planning and Evaluation Council. The Councils participate in the redress of parent and community grievances involving the school; work jointly with school personnel in the evaluation of systems for reporting pupil progress; encourage, develop, and/or negotiate the establishment of specific proposals for improvements in the educational plan; review existing or proposed school policies, programs, and practices; serve as consultants on building repair, remodeling, or construction; in conjunction with the region superintendent select the local school principal when a vacancy occurs, from a list of five candidates supplied by the Division of School Staff Relations.

A strong link with the community is provided by the employment of school community assistants. This paraprofessional position provides a liaison between the school and the community. It is the responsibility of the school community assistant to interpret the nonacademic functions of the school to the community and the concerns of the community to the school.

Media Centers. The innovative design of the NEC Project afforded the Department of School Libraries an opportunity to implement a cherished plan to convert traditional school libraries into complete media centers. Funds from Title III made it possible to purchase audiovisual equipment and materials for each library and, what is more important, to free the library of scheduled classes. The flexible schedule now in operation allows the media specialists to work with teachers and pupils full time. Classes are scheduled into the media centers by appointment, and individuals or small groups may use the facilities of the media center at any time.

The four librarians who were selected to serve as media specialists had previously served successfully in inner-city schools, were enthusiastic about the objectives of the Project, and eager to implement the concept of a multimedia approach of learning. They prepared themselves for the task of converting the existing traditional libraries into media centers by reading the available literature on the subject, visiting media centers in surrounding communities, attending workshops, and conferring with the administrators and teachers in their respective schools. One of the schools, a primary unit, had no centralized library, so the task here was to centralize the learning materials in the building and add necessary equipment and materials to complete the resources.

The media centers have met with enthusiastic response from both teachers and pupils. They hum with many varieties of activity at all times of day. Many boys and girls ordinarily turned off by reading because of discouraging experiences with the written word, flock to the media center at every opportunity. Filmstrips, recordings, slides, loops, tapes, and transparencies are in constant demand at every grade level and in every subject.

The independent learners are discovering that it is fun to listen and look and examine as they seek answers to their queries. Pupils who have mastered the basic skills can move ahead as rapidly as they wish, independent of others in the class who may proceed at a slower pace.

One eager fifth grade boy, feeling the contours of a world globe, announced to his teacher that he was going to prove that the world was

round. He was surrounded by books, maps, and overhead transparencies as he went about this serious independent investigation. A small girl in the second grade asked the librarian for something about opera. She wanted to draw pictures to accompany the story and music she had heard in her music class. Not yet a reader, but a learner nonetheless.

One of the most soul-satisfying results of the Project which is evident in the media centers is the fantastic expansion of the reading interests of the pupils involved. The librarians are running hard to keep up with the demands for materials on subjects which have emerged from research projects.

A group from a second grade came to the media center, announcing that they wished to do a research project on "starfish." The librarian had to admit that there was little simple material available and informed the



children that the encyclopedia articles were pretty difficult. One little girl brought joy to the librarian's heart by responding, "Don't worry about us, Miss Hunter, we can read anything!"

Curriculum Laboratory. A Curriculum Laboratory for the sole use of the Project is housed in one of the

schools, as a back-up facility for the media centers. It provides equipment, materials, and supplies for creating teaching and learning materials. The specialist in charge is a former mathematics teacher who is knowledgeable in the areas of audiovisual techniques and curriculum, and enthusiastic about demonstrating the preparation and use of creative learning materials.

At the half-way mark in the NEC Project it is still too soon to make judgments about the probabilities of its success. There is evidence, however, of the Project's impact on the children in the four schools, and on the teachers and administrators. Many children who were previously behavior problems have responded to the individual attention they are receiving and to new approaches to learning. Those who are frustrated by the intricacies of the written word are finding that films, filmstrips, overhead transparencies, and recordings are keys which unlock many subjects which would otherwise be lost to them. Likewise, pupils who have been baffled by mathematical concepts are discovering that handling and manipulating cubes, triangles, spheres, and other forms are pleasant ways to gain insights into concepts which heretofore seemed impossible.

Teachers have learned to share ideas, experiences, problems, and solutions. While there has been travail along the way, a team effort has developed, not only in the four individual schools, but in the Project as a whole. The in-service training which is a continuing element of the Project has assured a close working relationship between administrators and teachers. Committees are constantly striving to develop better techniques for instruction, and a wholesome attitude toward problem-solving has evolved from this opportunity to share in the total Project.

One of the greatest plus factors, certainly, is the community involvement. This is the Neighborhood Education Center, in truth as in name, and the parents who have cared enough to be involved have made a major contribution to the success of the Project. If the program proceeds without any further problems or unforeseen obstacles, there should be a measurable gain in individual achievement levels in Oral Language and Mathematical Skills. There has already been an immeasurable growth in the "intangibles." □□□