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Abstract

ERIC

This research report summarizes a study of independent study projects in 36 American secondary schools selected from a list of 317 schools nominated as having definite and organized independent study programs. The investigators found 8,584 students in the 36 schools involved in independent study programs. Independent study is defined as learning activity that is (1) motivated by the learner's own aims, (2) rewarded in terms of its intrinsic values, (3) somewhat independent of the class, and (4) using the services of teachers primarily as resources for the learner. Most schools offered independent study in from two to seven areas. The field drawing the largest number of students was science, followed by English and social studies. Questionnaire data gathered from 300 teachers showed that those teachers who have had experience with independent study programs favor their expansion. (MF)

Research Ideas Practice



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INDEPENDENT STUDY Academic Freedom, New Style

In 1965 William M. Alexander and Vynce A. Hines, both of the University of Florida, set out to see what independent study actually consists of in American secondary schools. With the help of USOE Cooperative Research Project grant No. 2969, they and their associates, Ernest Bentley, R. J. Moriconi, and James Wells, Research Assistants, visited 36 secondary schools--24 east of the Mississippi and 12 west of it--chosen from a list of 317 schools originally nominated by state departments of education and other knowledgeable sources. Their findings will be described in full in a book, Independent Study in Secondary Schools, to be published later this year. The National Association of Secondary School Principals is most grateful for the opportunity to present here their summary of what they found, along with a few of their reactions. Most of what follows is based directly upon their own manuscript, though we at NASSP have added some comments for which we must take the responsibility.

Developing Definition

From the outset, the investigators needed some working definition of independent study. Even though they knew they might change the definition later, they had to have criteria by which to decide which kinds of programs to study. they had to guide the nominators who were to select the schools to be visited. working definition assumed that all programs properly called independent study have four characteristics in common:

- Independent study is different from the uniform assignments made to all or a majority of the students in a class. (Individual assignments within a common framework--e.g., a term paper on a topic of one's own choosing--do not meet this qualification.)
- The study is individually and specifically planned for a specific student ь.
- The learning activities involved may be carried on in school facilities or elsewhere as agreed on by teachers.
- The learning activity receives school recognition in the form of course credit, either full or partial, or some other evaluation of it is made and entered in official school records.



As the study went forward the definition was modified. Observations of programs in action, discussions with teachers, administrators, and students, studies of professional literature, and the researchers' own developing ideas of what ought to constitute independent study eventually produced a new definition quite different in emphasis from the original. It was finally agreed that

Independent study is <u>learning activity motivated largely by the learner's own aims</u> to learn and <u>rewarded largely in terms of its intrinsic values</u>. As carried on under the auspices of secondary schools, <u>such activity is somewhat independent of the class or other group-instructional practices</u>. And it utilizes the <u>services of teachers</u> and other professional personnel primarily as resources for the learner.

Types of Independent Study

The programs observed fell into five categories. The categories overlap, and a particular independent study plan may belong in two or more of the classes. Yet it appeared to the research group that this scheme of classification offered one way of identifying some common elements among 36 programs that had so many different details.

- 1. <u>Independent study as a privilege or option</u>. Here independent study is a choice students may exercise if they wish, although participation is often encouraged by scheduling and other administrative arrangements. The option is available to a large number of students, perhaps even to the entire student body.
- 2. <u>Individually planned independent study</u>. Each member of a class or of some other identifiable group is given personal guidance in planning and carrying out a program of study related to his own needs or motivation. Programed materials are sometimes used in this pattern. (The guidance is individual but there is no tutorial instruction aimed at some course norm.)
- 3. <u>Job-oriented programs</u>. In this pattern independent study focuses on preparation for a particular job or vocation or career. The jobs being prepared for may range from semi-skilled occupations to graduate-level research in an academic discipline.
- 4. Quest-type programs for the development of special aptitudes. The category includes a variety of activities for students who work almost completely on their own in the exploration, extension, or refinement of special talents or interests. These may or may not be closely related to career choices.
- 5. Seminars based on independent study. In this pattern students engaged in independent study come together to share their reading, their projects, or their research findings. The seminar is not just another class, but a case of intellectual sharing.

Where the Action Was

The investigators found 8584 students in the 36 schools involved in independent study programs. Although by definition independent study activities are not likely to fit snugly into the usual subject-matter fields, about a dozen instructional

areas were sponsoring independent study: English, social studies, science, mathematics, foreign language, fine arts, business education, home economics, industrial arts, vocational education, and physical education. In two schools, independent study opportunities were available in every one of these fields, while two other schools limited the opportunities to a single instructional area. Most schools offered independent study in from two to seven areas.

Twenty-nine schools had independent study options in English, 28 in science, 26 in social studies, 19 in mathematics, and 19 in fine arts. The field drawing the largest number of students was science, with 2349; it was followed by English, with 1767, and social studies, with 1123.

A good many students were carrying on projects in more than one area. And projects frequently crossed the customary subject lines or drew on the content and the structure of several academic disciplines.

These figures are not to be interpreted as value judgments or as a listing of priorities. Schools apparently expanded their curriculums in the direction of independent study at different points for a variety of different reasons. Perhaps the most meaningful generalization that can be drawn from these data is that <u>independent study is possible and can be profitable in any instructional field likely to appear in a school's curriculum.</u>

And Examples of the Action

When only a few illustrations can be presented, the reader may be tempted to view them as the "ten best" or as recommended models. Of course, some judgment of value has entered into the choice of the cases that follow, but they are offered simply as representing promising ideas and demonstrating possibilities that a few schools have opened up.

Social Studies. Two types of independent study programs were seen in the Shaker Heights, Ohio, High School. One of these was an internship in local government, organized and largely operated by students. It was designed to help them understand local government and the duties and responsibilities of local officials. The project was carried on after school hours both in the school and at the city hall.

In a second, quite different, kind of individual project, the research staff heard a student present a study in which he contrasted Hoover's and Roosevelt's ways of dealing with the depression. The presentation was made before a faculty group, whose questions the student deftly fielded. The situation was very much like the interrogation of a graduate student on his dissertation.

French. In the University High School at the University of Illinois, fourth-year French consisted mainly of independent study. Each student planned a reading and study program with the advice and guidance of a foreign language teacher. He then worked on his own, with feedback to the teacher/adviser taking the form of written papers, reviews of films and plays, taped materials, oral and written book reports given in French, and other more extensive reports (also made in French) based on reading done on some topic or problem.

English. Students in Evanston Township High School, Evanston, Illinois, who hoped to earn advanced placement in English were enrolled in a seminar (of which there were several sections) where study was largely individual. Each student made a thorough study of a novelist, a poet, and a playwright, preparing a critique on

each writer and his work. These essays were duplicated for all members of the seminar, and students took turns serving as teacher or discussion leader. All students read at least one work by each author discussed in the seminar. The teacher's role was mainly that of resource person.

Remedial and Developmental Reading. Several of the schools visited provided independent study opportunities in this field. In the Coral Gables, Florida, High School a student could enter the remedial reading program on his own initiative or at the suggestion of a teacher. He started with a series of diagnostic tests. With the test results and other pertinent data in hand, the student and a reading specialist planned an improvement program. From there on, although the teacher was available on request, the student was almost completely on his own in scheduling his practice, selecting materials, and testing himself for progress. A study plan of this sort might last only a few weeks, but it might extend to a semester or more.

Science. Able science students in the high schools of Dade County, Florida, were released afternoons to work on research projects with doctors, engineers, and scientists in hospitals, industrial laboratories, the University of Miami, and the marine biology station in much the way a graduate student works with a senior professor.

Some of the students have been co-authors of papers published in scientific journals and most of them have gone on to major in science, engineering, and medicine in college. A former science teacher coordinated the project.

Vocational Education. Vocational curricula with significant independent study features were noted in two schools. In the Industrial Cooperative Training Program in the Victoria, Texas, High School students could enroll in a program designed for them personally in preparation for becoming aircraft metal workers, auto body repairmen, chefs, carpenters, dental assistants, dry cleaners, glaziers, meat cutters, nurses aids, welders, and sheet metal workers.

Students had three regular classes, a training station where they worked for pay four hours a day, and an individualized class related to their job area. A program coordinator checked students regularly, both on the job and in school. Incidentally, some potential dropouts were recruited for this program and wound up with a high school diploma, a salable skill, and a job.

Amphitheater High School in Tucson, Arizona, had two experimental programs, one in agricultural mechanics and the other in vocational horticulture. In each, ten students were being rotated among several out-of-school training stations where they worked for pay. As at Victoria, each student was also involved in a job-related independent study program.

A Comprehensive Program. Shoreline High School in Seattle was one of the two schools visited that offered independent study in all twelve areas mentioned earlier. To cite one example, students in the Laboratory Assistants Program set up the laboratory for the biology class, maintained equipment, organized and prepared projects for display, and assisted with the teaching.

A Dropout-Prevention Program. The Central Community High School of Flint, Michigan, designed a curriculum for 150 young people who were potential dropouts. All subject areas were included, and small classes--15 pupils--made individual attention and independent study possible. The students had been selected because of poor school attendance, low achievement, and indifferent attitudes, as well as because of lack



of adjustment to school life and expectations. They were given personal and group counseling and encouraged to participate more extensively in school activities. This "personalized curriculum" was handled by some of the school's most experienced teachers. Special attention was given to basic academic skills, employment possibilities, and preparation for returning to regular school classes.

For Whom, and How Free?

It is possible to locate independent study programs aimed at students whose academic performance is less than adequate—and two or three instances have been noted above. But schools in the research sample were using independent study primarily to permit able students to do something beyond what they might do in their regular classes. Furthermore, all but a few of the 8584 were either juniors or seniors.

A preference for reserving independent study for unusually competent and older high school students can also be seen in the responses that 300 teachers in the 36 schools made to items on a checklist. Asked what qualities were basic to successful pursuit of independent study, most of them chose such characteristics as "ability to accept responsibility," "intellectual curiosity," and "goal orientation beyond high school."

Scheduling Patterns

It may seem anomalous to schedule independent study, since it is presumed to be free and individual. Still, students engaged in independent study projects generally also have regularly scheduled commitments in the rest of their work. Unless some planning is done, their independent study may be squeezed into odds and ends of time. Therefore, even if independent study is never completely scheduled, as classes are, the provision of adequate time deserves devoted concern on the part of the schedule-maker.

Observation in the 36 schools revealed a number of ways of providing time for individual study. Ten patterns of scheduling independent study, here somewhat paraphrased, were identified by James Wells, who made this the subject of his dissertation. These were not mutually exclusive, and several plans might be operating at the same time in a particular school. No data were gathered as to which of the plans work best; the following are simply the categories into which observed practices seem to fit comfortably.

- 1. Some released time from regular classes to work on individually planned studies in addition to class assignments. A depth-study reading program in American history sponsored by the New York State Department of Education illustrated this type.
- 2. Some released time given from regular classes in lieu of class assignments. The Beatrice, Nebraska, High School science program featured released time for library investigation or laboratory research on topics or problems of strong personal interest beyond the usual class material.
- 3. Small seminar groups in which all students work independently part of the time on common or individual topics, units, or problems. Seminar 12 at Miami, Florida, Senior High School enabled eleven able senior students to cover a wide range of topics in social studies.



- 4. Individually planned programs with scheduled independent study in or out of school with a minimum of teacher supervision. In a number of schools a student might schedule a course such as analytic geometry or calculus not offered in his school, plan suitable coverage with a teacher, have conferences as needed, and take an examination for college credit or advanced placement.
- 5. Independent study as part of a program of instruction organized around large or small group instruction. This integral part of the recommendations of the Commission on Staff Utilization of NASSP was found in a number of places.
- 6. <u>Individual extracurricular enrichment study with students working out-of-school hours--mornings, evenings, week-ends</u>. The Shaker Heights Government Internship program was an excellent example.
- 7. Vocational or work-experience programs in which students work independently in or out of school to develop salable skills. Industrial Cooperative Training at Victoria, Texas, vocational agricultural mechanics and horticulture at Amphitheater High School, Tucson, the Industrial Sewing Design Program at Camden, South Carolina, High School, and the Cadet Teaching Program at Flint, Michigan, Central Community High School were varied examples of this type.
- 8. A program emphasizing student responsibility in use of regularly offered independent study time. Instead of regular classes, one day a week was given to fostering independent learning and self-directed study in the Freshman Project at the Chicago Laboratory School. The program was intended to help the student become: (1) more free and self-directed as a learner, (2) a producer of learning, (3) self-sufficient, self-reliant, and responsible, (4) intrinsically motivated toward learning, (5) related to the teacher as consultant rather than pupil.
- 9. Independent work as individual members of a regular class. Advanced courses in journalism, art, industrial arts, and music were organized this way in in several of the schools visited.
- 10. A regularly scheduled class in which all students are expected to do some individually planned, independent study. Benjamin Franklin Senior High School, New Orleans, Louisiana, required three major research papers each year from each student. In grades 10 and 11, these were done in English, social studies, and science; in grade 12 one was in English and two in courses of the student's choice.

Essential Resources It is more than coincidence that the schools with strong independent study pro-

grams almost always have better than average library collections and other related facilities. Teachers and administrators consistently rated an adequate library as the single most important resource for independent study.

Laboratories rank a close second in importance as a resource. Where laboratories do not meet all needs, many students have been able to improvise additional facilities at home. Often, too, arrangements can be made whereby high school students have access to laboratories in hospitals and local industries—and to those in a college if there is one nearby.

It seems equally important to <u>make individual work spaces or stations available</u> where students can work privately and where their materials can be safely left between work sessions. <u>Spaces for conferences</u> between teacher and student and for discussions among several students are also required if the full potential of

independent study is to be realized. Furthermore, it is most desirable to have areas where students can make use of audiovisual materials of various kinds; and there ought also to be easy access to such working tools as typewriters, photo copiers, art studios, and shops since independent study when fully developed often calls for something more than just reading and writing.

In the latter connection it should be noted that the newer developments in educational technology have so far had only a modest impact on the independent study movement. There may be many reasons for this. Perhaps a prominent reason is that little of the "soft ware" thus far developed for use with modern instruments is geared to the needs of the abler students for whom independent study opportunities tend mainly to be reserved.

Of course, some types of independent study are heavily dependent on resources outside of school--for example, projects in vocational horticulture and industrial cooperative training. And public or private libraries that have developed special collections are sometimes excellent places for students to pursue their researches.

What Difference Does It Make?

Innovations in American education have seldom been adequately evaluated. The independent study movement is no exception thus far, and hard data are scarce. However, there is some scattered evidence.

Opinionnaire data were gathered from 300 teachers in the 36 schools, and these were combined with the facts and judgments accumulated by interviews with teachers, administrators, and pupils. Taken altogether, these data provide respectable support for at least a few of the claims made for independent study. Furthermore, apart from the present study, there have been efforts to make systematic evaluations of three of the 36 programs: at the University of Illinois High School, in the Dade County, Florida, high schools, and at the University of Chicago Laboratory School. Evidence from these various sources permit statements here on three of the presumed values of independent study.

- 1. It is said that: <u>Independent study provides for needs and interests of the individual</u>. The 300 teachers were practically unanimous in saying that this is true. Student testimony confirms this. Problem students and low-achievers have responded favorably in a number of schools, and independent study opportunities have appeared in several schools to reduce dropout rates. Independent study has contributed significantly to the development of salable skills on the part of many youngsters who are following a vocational program.
- 2. It is said that: <u>Independent study allows boys and girls to follow topics or interests not represented at all or not fully in the regular curriculum.</u> A few unusual projects seen recently will demonstrate how far beyond the "regular curriculum" independent study can take a high schooler when the academic climate is right and resources are at hand: (1) making applications of digital computers to engineering problems, (2) studying the effects of verbal reinforcement on generalization, (3) developing a program for computer translation of a language, (4) third-year, college-level Chinese, (5) composing and performing original musical compositions, (6) conducting a longitudinal sociological study of a community, (7) adapting a novel for a dramatic performance, (8) producing a radio program aired weekly over a local commercial radio station.
- 3. It is said that: <u>Independent study improves student performance beyond</u> high school. Not enough dependable and relevant data are at hand to permit a firm



position on this claim. When students who had been involved in the Dade County Laboratory Research project were followed up, they were found to be doing extremely well in college, but no comparison was made with a similar group of young people from the regular program. Most other follow-up attempts have had similar weaknesses.

Isolating the impact of a single, possible causative factor in something as complex as a college student's performance or a young adult's achievement on a job or in his home requires a degree of research sophistication that few schools may possess. Anyway, it may be sufficient to justify independent study on the basis of what it means to a student at the time he is involved in that activity. Nonetheless, it does seem that every school should make some attempt to assess the long-range effects of independent study on its participants, even though the research tools may not be sharp.

Although they represent evaluation of a different kind, a few personal remarks by the research team are appropriate at this point.

- Literature, professional meetings, and correspondence files are all filled with interest and good intentions with regard to independent study, but no more than one school in a hundred appears to be using independent study as it was defined earlier in this Report.
- Writers advocate independent study for all high school students, but most operating programs are directed toward above-average and gifted young people.
- Advocates say that independent study in some form should be available to youngsters at every secondary school grade level, but in practice this kind of learning experience is reserved almost entirely for 11th and 12th graders.
- There is a tendency to limit independent study opportunities to the established academic areas--mathematics, science, language arts, social studies. But this limitation seems unnecessary and unwise since some schools have applied the idea to the full spectrum of the school's instructional program.
- Overwhelmingly, teachers who have had experience with independent study want to expand it. Administrators are enthusiastic, too.
- There are some problems: notably, adequate financial support, ways of scheduling teachers and students, attitudes of nonparticipating teachers, and the preparation of teachers to participate.



It was surprising—and disappointing—that so few schools were proposed to the research staff as having definite and organized independent study programs when the project was set up in 1965. Admittedly, the list of 317 schools originally nominated was incomplete in spite of efforts made to see that it was comprehensive. But even if allowance is made for holes in the sampling procedure, it is a cause for concern to those who are eager to see that American secondary education is improved by extensive adoption of promising departures from traditional ways to find that in 1965-66 no more than one percent of our high schools could be said to have anything like a broad spectrum of opportunities for their students to engage in independent study.



In the two years since the list was compiled the number of schools with what can honestly be called organized programs of independent study has grown somewhat. Furthermore, undoubtedly, a great many students and teachers in the remaining 99 percent of the schools are involved in independent study in an informal way. There are many schools in which particular departments or teaching teams are carrying on instructional activities that satisfy the definition that has been given for independent study. These personal and individual efforts are not to be belittled, for frequently they lead to more extensive and official school plans.

Making a Beginning

Teachers and administrators in the 36 schools making up the study sample were almost unanimous in favoring the expanding of independent study opportunities in their own schools, and students in these schools were equally enthusiastic. Furthermore, professional judgment is heavily on the side of greater use of this departure from established pedagogical patterns. But in spite of this experience and testimony a major question remains unanswered: How can more schools be encouraged to experiment with plans of independent study developed to fit their local conditions but at the same time meeting broader qualifications?

Observations of the programs in the 36 schools produced no simple formula for initiating independent study activities. The plans themselves varied greatly, and the ideas and conditions from which they sprang were equally varied. It is clear, however, that careful faculty study and planning had preceded the inauguration of every one of the successful programs, and equally careful faculty attention continued to be given the program once it was in operation.

Neither a main-office directive nor a majority vote in a faculty meeting is a promising opening, although both administration and faculty must be accepting and supportive if independent study is to become a significant and continuing element in a secondary school's instructional design.

The absence of precedents, the lack of historically and professionally approved guidelines for the conduct of independent study at the secondary school level can be a doubly encouraging state of affairs: (1) independent study can be a stimulating innovation in a school, and (2) the school, teachers, and students can be free to exercise their own creative abilities in exploiting the potential of this innovation.

But there is an accompanying threat to the realization of this liberalizing potential. This threat arises, on the one hand, from a widespread tendency to think that to be true to its name independent study must be free of practically all control or guidance--that about all that is needed is for a student to have time to study independently and a place or places to do it.

The threat comes from a second direction: the tendency for many teachers to try to establish the same kind of relationship with a student at work on an independent study project as he would with a student receiving tutorial assistance of one kind or another.

Individual attention or help and independent study are not synonymous phrases.

These possibilities emphasize the fact that there is at least as much need for "curriculum planning" relating to independent study as there is with any other aspect

of the secondary school curriculum. A considerable amount of independent study on the part of administration and teachers seems a necessary prelude to the introduction of students to independent study if learning experiences of this sort are to be satisfactory and satisfying.

Some Independent Variables

There are several important issues that must be resolved if independent study is to become a common and effective element in curriculum design. (But these unanswered questions need not keep any school from doing its own experimenting with the idea. Actually, it is more likely that the resolution of these issues will come from such "private enterprise" than from formal and rigorous experimental projects.) As stated here, the issues are phrased in rather general terms, and some general answers are needed. At the same time, any school that is considering initiating or enlarging its commitment to independent study must find answers for these questions that are suitable to its own resources and student body.

What types of independent study programs can be most effectively utilized with average and below-average students? Are there kinds of students for whom independent study is completely inappropriate?

Under what conditions, if any, is independent study in grades below the 11th likely to be valuable? What about its use in the junior high school?

What are the specific purposes that should mark an independent study program in a particular school with special reference to other than subject-matter content outcomes?

What plans and instruments for evaluation can be developed better to assess the immediate and longrange effectiveness of independent study experiences?

How can teachers' schedules be developed so that teachers will have time to counsel students engaged in study projects?

What kinds of inservice (and preservice) experiences are most satisfactory in preparing teachers to take part in independent study activities?

Keeping the End in Sight

In concluding the manuscript they sent the editor, Alexander and Hines said:

We view the future of independent study with considerable optimism. We have seen many good practices, even though we wish there were more to see. Enough people in enough different school settings were enthusiastic about their experiences with independent study to add more fire to our enthusiasm for the procedure. (It may not be quite proper for a research team to admit a preference

for a procedure it is exploring, but in this case we may as well admit our bias.) When you get right down to it, there seems to be no real opposition, at least of a theoretical kind, to greater use of independent study.

There is, however, need to keep attention focused on what we consider the fundamental aim of any independent study program. The aim is not to free students of class and classroom assignments, nor is it to free young people of the supervision and direction of teachers.

The fundamental aim of independent study is not to reduce teachers' instructional duties; it is not just another gimmick for introducing an attractive novelty into the organization of instruction.

Rightly used, independent study is a most promising tool for helping individual boys and girls to become more self-directive in their learning and, in the process, to explore intellectual and aesthetic channels which would not be open to them through the more usual curriculum processes.

Kudos

The National Association of Secondary School Principals is most grateful to Professors Alexander and Hines for making available materials and conclusions from their researches on independent study and for doing the basic manuscript from which this <u>Curriculum Report</u> was developed. (The names of the 36 schools used in this investigation are listed on page 12.) They provided more material than could be used here. Happily, however, <u>Independent Study in Secondary Schools</u>, a fuller discussion of their research project is to be published soon by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

F.T.W.

School

Amphitheater High School Basset High School Evanston Township High School Andrew P. Hill High School Lincoln High School Littleton High School Wilmington High School Cocoa Beach Junior-Senior HS Coral Gables High School Miami Senior High School U. of Chicago Laboratory HS University HS, U. of Illinois Salina High School Benjamin Franklin High School John F. Kennedy High School Flint Central Community HS Chippewa Valley High School University City High School Beatrice High School Valley High School The New Hampton School Half Hollow Hills High School Earl L. Vandermeulen HS Shaker Heights Senior HS Easton Junior High School Camden High School Dalewood Junior High School Victoria High School Washington & Lee High School George Wythe High School William Fleming High School Oak Glen High School Wisconsin Heights High School

City, State

Tucson, Arizona Bassett, California Evanston, Illinois San Jose, California Stockton, California Littleton, Colorado Wilmington, Delaware Cocoa Beach, Florida Coral Gables, Florida Miami, Florida Chicago, Illinois Urbana, Illinois Salina, Kansas New Orleans, Louisiana Silver Spring, Maryland Flint, Michigan Mt. Clemens, Michigan University City, Missouri Beatrice, Nebraska Las Vegas, Nevada New Hampton, N. Hampshire Huntington, New York Port Jefferson, New York Shaker Heights, Ohio Easton, Pennsylvania Camden, South Carolina Chattanooga, Tennessee Victoria, Texas Arlington, Virginia Richmond, Virginia Seattle, Washington New Cumberland, W. Va. Mazomanie, Wisconsin

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