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ABSTRACT

THIS ILLUSTRATED BOOK WAS WRITTEN TO ENCOURAGE AND SHARE WITH TEACHERS THE MEANS TO DEVELOP INDEPENDENT LEARNERS IN THEIR CLASSROOMS. IT IS SUGGESTED THAT TEACHERS START LEARNING ACTIVITIES BY SCHEDULING A DAILY PERIOD WHEN CHILDREN MAY FREELY USE MATERIALS AND INTERACT WITH OTHERS. ONE SECTION OF THE BOOK IS DEVOTED TO ORGANIZING AND HELPING CHILDREN TO USE LEARNING CENTERS FOR LISTENING, READING, AND WRITING. TO ILLUSTRATE THE LEARNING POTENTIAL OF STUDENT CHOICE-MAKING, EXCERPTS FROM A STUDY GROUP'S EXPERIENCES AND A FIRST GRADE TEACHER'S LOG ARE PRESENTED. SUGGESTIONS ARE GIVEN FOR MAKING AND CARRYING OUT RULES AND GUIDELINES FOR INDIVIDUAL AS WELL AS GROUP ACTIVITIES. OBSERVATIONS AND INTERVIEWS INVOLVING CONSULTANTS, TEACHERS, AND CHILDREN CAN BE USED TO EVALUATE INDEPENDENT LEARNING FOR EACH CHILD AND THE CLASS. THE BOOK CONCLUDES BY OFFERING CRITERIA FOR THE TEACHER'S SELF-EVALUATION AND APPRAISAL OF THE SCHOOL'S PROGRAM. (DR)

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Introduction

Helping children to think and work independently of their teachers is an important educational goal; few teachers world disagree with this objective. But many elementary educators are reluctant to embark on a program of independent activities for their children because they believe that it is an impossible task for a single teacher to assume. They reason that new school buildings, elaborate equipment, and many additional staff members are necessary to make any real changes successful, and that new programs could not possibly succeed in their current situations.

For this reason, Lois Williams' book is especially welcome. In stressing that teachers can and should work with what they have and that they can greatly improve independent learning by experimenting within the self-contained classroom, Mrs. Williams offers a practical guide to teachers who have been anxious to plan more independent activities with their children.

Her suggestions for setting up free activity periods and learning centers, helping children make choices, and checking on the growth of their independence should also support teachers who have already experimented with these ideas and found them successful. Perhaps these innovative teachers will be encouraged by Mrs. Williams to share their ideas with others in their schools.

It's true that much has been done in recent years to individualize children's learning, but I'm sure you'll agree with me that we have only begun to plan programs that truly reflect our knowledge of the young learner. Our thanks go to Mrs. Williams for writing a book which should stimulate those who read it to put this knowledge into action in their classrooms.

John D. Greene
President
American Association of Elementary-
Kindergarten-Nursery Educators
November 1969

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But the list grows long. It should include all of my professional colleagues who find any of their ideas here.

Lois E. Williams

The Value of Independent Activities

For many children, "independent activities" are simply assignments to be done on their own. At the conclusion of a directed lesson the teacher distributes a lesson or assigns a page or two in a workbook. She then goes on to work with another group while these children work (hopefully) without disturbing her or other children. Some hurry through, others dawdle; some run into trouble and give up, although they may know how to appear occupied. For those who finish quickly another kind of "independent activity" is available. This actually is a reward. They are allowed to choose from several possibilities, all prepared earlier by the teacher. Eventually a bell rings and the race is over except for the dawdlers, who may be asked to stay after school or finish the work at home.

There are practical reasons for this interpretation of "independent activities." Large classes, inadequate space, inappropriate furniture,

unimaginative materials, and lack of supplies combine to favor routine classroom management. Continuous change in subject matter presses elementary teachers to keep up with content as well as with new teaching techniques. There seems to be no end to the "expanding curriculum." Since there is too little time to teach what children should learn, efficiency in covering material takes first place. A seven-year-old, attending her fifth school in two years, defined a teacher as "A grownup 21 years old and up. Boss of children. Working, working, busy as a bee. A worker working all the time."

But if the purpose of independent activities is to develop independent learners, we must see these activities as doing more than keeping children quietly occupied while the teacher is engaged with other pupils. They must be an integral part of a developmental progression toward independent learning.

The preamble to the bylaws of the American Association of Elementary-Kindergarten-Nursery Educators states, "The elementary school can render no more important service to the elementary school children of the United States than to help each child to develop as an intellectually curious, loving, competent, self-confident, informed and responsible individual."

H. Gerthon Morgan, of the Institute for Child Study at the University of Maryland, asks if teachers, because they are authorities, elicit self-discipline or passive obedience. He states, "In a sense we are being forced into the wonderful position of having to help youngsters to see themselves as learners, to learn to discover how they themselves learn and to take a major responsibility for their own learning."

Writing for Project III on Instruction for the California State Committee on Education, John Goodlad says, "If we value mankind at all, we always must be preoccupied with developing individuals who possess a sense of purpose, identity and worth. Self-doubt and alienation from others are perennial illnesses that show no sign of lessening in modern society. Change, rapid obsolescence of values and things, and automation compound the search for identity. Clearly, from the beginning, boys and girls in our schools must assume (and this means the opportunity to assume) responsibility for their education. Certainly, no one else can, although many other persons seem to think they can. School must not be a struggle or even a dialogue between those who know (teachers) and those who don't (students)."

The purpose of this book is to support teachers who are nurturing independence in their students and to encourage them to share their ideas and experiences with colleagues who are not involved in such projects. Hopefully, the book will stimulate discussion and argument, reading, experimentation, and action research projects. In later chapters

we shall consider the following assumptions and the ways in which some teachers and children are testing them:

- To live constructively, now or in the future, people must be self-initiating learners.
- A child's mind is won for learning through relationships of mutual respect with his teacher. The quality of these relationships is probably the best facilitator of learning.
- People must see themselves as being capable of initiating and directing their own activities if they are to become increasingly independent learners.
- Teaching which helps children learn to learn requires continuous diagnosis of individual needs, thoughtful selection of activities and materials, and an environment which changes with the needs and interests of the learners.
- One teacher, or several, cannot possibly supply everything needed for dynamic learning. But one teacher or several can work with children to create an environment in which all help each other learn.

Getting Started

If children choose their learning activities only when their assignments have been completed, some have the opportunity to choose several times a day, others seldom or never. This means that some have extensive practice in choice-making and others none. To remedy this state of affairs, elementary teachers can borrow an idea from nursery and kindergarten teachers who schedule a daily period when all children may freely interact with the people and materials available to them. During this time teachers are not doing clerical work at their desks, but are quietly and intently watching the children. They are available when asked for assistance, but spend most of this period learning a great deal about each pupil.

On the first day of school the teacher may say, "Every day, when you come into our room after lunch [or the morning recess, or whenever you decide] you may choose anything you want to do. I'll show you the materials and equipment we have now. As the year goes on we'll have

much more. I'll need your ideas about other materials, so you'll want to be thinking of what we can add and what we don't need any more."

Some teachers assign small groups to each activity center at least once so that everyone knows what is available. Others like to "turn the kids loose" so that they can discover for themselves. The first few periods can be very short if the teacher is hesitant about granting this kind of freedom. Or she may observe the class and bring them together for evaluation when she feels they are ready. Two basic questions may be phrased in any way she chooses: "What did you like about this period?" and "How can we make it even better tomorrow?"

At first, children will handle themselves in a variety of ways. Some will be purposeful and will concentrate. Some may wander around and others will be indifferent or disruptive. There will probably be some shoving and quarreling. Those with little experience in making choices in a classroom may follow the teacher around, hoping for direction. This is a wonderful time to begin to assess a child's independence level, to listen, to watch interaction. But if the first attempts are chaotic, don't give up! Learning to make choices is a life-long task, and you have a whole year ahead to move with your children toward this goal.

What materials might you have on hand? To many children, "independent activities" have often meant work sheets, or questions on the board to be answered, or exercises at the end of a chapter. Now they will enjoy a wide array of materials. If you have several well-stocked learning centers you are well on your way. A reading, writing, listening, art, science, game, or hobby center provides a place for several children to select activities. If your room is not arranged this way, show the children where supplies and equipment are kept. During daily evaluation time, they will discuss ways to organize and arrange materials and space. This period will provide more than individual choice of activity. It will be a daily forum for group decisions of real importance to everyone in the class. Perhaps the children will find an appropriate name for this time of day, which should be called something more exciting than "activity period" or "choosing time."

Let us look at the example of a Head Start teacher in an urban neighborhood who set up such an independent activity period after the morning circle. During this period the children did whatever they chose; no suggestions or directions were given except for one "special event," which changed daily. A listening table, library corner, and playhouse were permanent centers. Many toys and puzzles were on low shelves, along with building blocks.

On the day described, the production table had a variety of materials for making Christmas cards and the "special event" was decorating cookies; there were only three chairs at this table. The aide took mate-

rials to make play dough to a table and two children asked to mix it. The teacher and aide were always available, but did not participate unless invited. Two children took chairs to the listening table, selected a record, arranged their headsets, and started the phonograph. After a while another child asked the aide to hold the book which accompanied the record and turn the pages as he listened; the first two children stayed for this. The teacher showed each child who came to the table the cookie decorations and then moved away.

The teacher was invited to the library to play the autoharp and sing a song, to look at a girl in her playhouse clothes, and to "keep John from smashing my [block]house." A girl who selected a pipe assembly game persisted for 15 minutes and returned later to screw on successfully the joint that she could not add at first. Claude began to build a large house and yard and was joined by John just after the beginning of the period; they played with blocks for the rest of their free time. A few children chose to watch the activities of others, concentrating without looking up once during the time they were observing another child.

At 10:35 the teacher flicked the light switch on and off. This was the signal that recess was ten minutes away. Several children began at once to put things away. Four moved to areas in which they had not worked. Darrel and David washed the tables, Frances put all the puzzles in the rack, Andre put away the phonograph record, and Beatriz swept up scraps from the Christmas card venture. No one asked them to do these tasks.

The blocks were the biggest job. The boys who had played with them were joined by two others, and as they stacked them on the shelves they paid no attention to Mike, who crawled through the area pushing a boat. David stayed in the playhouse, examining the camera. The teacher asked for more help with the blocks and three other children joined the stacking crew. The aide moved to the door, a signal for recess, and the children left the room casually, in two's and three's.

If you teach older children you may be tempted to say, "So what? A teacher with an aide and 15 children can let them do anything they want to for 45 minutes a day. They should see my situation!" Before you dismiss this illustration, though, please think about these ideas to see whether they can be adapted to the needs of teachers who must handle larger classes alone:

1. The teacher selected centers, materials, and equipment for specific individual and group needs.
2. Self-selection was exactly that. No adult suggested any activity for any child.
3. The adults were available but did not intrude, suggest, or scold.
4. Impulse control was high. Only one child felt he could not cope with a situation and appealed for adult help.
5. Self-selected, undirected classroom activity is a vital and integral part of the total strategy for learning.

Problems will arise, but having teachers and students work out solutions is part of the learning. The important fact is that you have changed a quiet, passive desire to "finish your work" into an opportunity for *every* child to grow toward independent learning.

Organizing Learning Centers

After you have begun to give your children more freedom for independent activities, you will want to consider new ways of organizing your classroom to encourage such activities as much as possible. One popular way of organizing an elementary classroom is by setting up learning centers, which provide places within the classroom for using and storing materials that relate to a special interest or curriculum area.

The next three sections in this chapter will suggest some ways to organize listening, reading, and writing centers and to help children use them. But the same basic ideas apply to science, arts and crafts, music, arithmetic, or any other school subject. You may want to organize only one center in your room. You may want to establish several, for the rest of the year or for a shorter time. You may even want to eliminate all assigned classroom seats. Whatever your plan, you will be helping children to become increasingly responsible learners.

For Listening

A tape recorder, a supply of tape, and a table wired for headsets make up one of the simplest and most potent tools for independent learning. After receiving a few lessons in using headsets, turning the recorder on and off, and getting and replacing materials needed for the lesson, even preschool children can work alone in a listening center.

Lessons can be prepared for any subject, any individual, or any group of children. They may be recorded by the teacher or edited from commercial tapes. These taped lessons are easily stored. When obsolete, they can be erased and the tape used for a new recording. With a tape library, a teacher can literally be in two places at once.

Most young children prefer the voice of their own teacher, although another voice is needed now and then for variety. A man's voice is a welcome change. Stories can be recorded by parents, retired people, even convalescents. Music can be taped at home for use at school. Once you begin, the possibilities for this tool are limitless.

Teachers often cooperate in planning and recording so that they quickly collect a variety of lessons. First efforts are often disappointing, but let the children judge and then suggest improvements. If you wait until you are completely satisfied with the result, you may never produce a tape to use.

Two second grade teachers have cooperated for several years and have a large and versatile tape library. Each lesson is in a labeled envelope at the listening center. If accessories, such as figures for individual flannel boards, counters, work sheets, etc. are needed, they are placed in the envelope. The listening center also has shelves for individual flannel boards, acetate covers for work sheets, pencils, and crayons. Some of the "tape kits" include:

- A story with written follow-up activities
- A story to be followed as the teacher reads (a bell tone indicates that it is time to turn the page)
- Sheets for practice in identifying initial consonants, with a different set of pictures for each child
- "Lotto" games for phonics review
- Music for relaxation and fun
- Arithmetic worksheets selected for individual children, with acetate sheets over them (in a simple teacher-made frame) and a key underneath for self-checking
- Simple crossword puzzles, designed by the teacher
- Commentary or questions about a filmstrip
- Matching games
- Poetry for reading and memorizing

- Specific directions for various activities
- Stories taped by children
- Information needed for a social studies concept
- Riddles

These teachers see growth in individual and group responsibility. They do not need to interfere with children at the listening center. The children evaluate their lesson, often recording their comments for the teacher to hear later. They also make suggestions for additional tapes. The teachers try to have a wide variety of tapes so that the children will continue to look forward to their time at the center. They also add sparkle by presenting a tape now and then which begins, "Today there is a surprise. You won't be working—you'll be listening just for fun."

Much can be done with child-made tapes. The recorder has enormous potential for developing self-esteem, as is illustrated by an excerpt from a first grade teacher's log about a hard-to-reach child:

> Just before recess Davie asked if he could practice with me. We are learning two songs for the PTA Christmas program and he said he wanted to practice. This was his very first move toward anything like this (he is very babyish and petulant much of the time) so we sang together during the whole recess. This was a delight! During the next recess he took me to the listening center and we recorded ourselves singing together. When we played it back, Davie fell in love with that tape. He played it softly during the whole next period. Four children stayed close by while the others worked independently at a number of tasks. These five then started to interview each other on tape, with Davie running the equipment. He was the supreme interviewer. When it came his turn to answer another child's questions, he said proudly, and with almost no babyish speech, "I am Davie Wayne Martin and I go to Bell Gardens Elementary School." During the playback, he answered the questions along with the tape. At 2:30 everyone left but Davie and "just one more time for my song" stretched to 20 minutes. Every time he played it, he sang along. He was finally torn between "just one more time" and what his mother would say if he were late getting home; the latter won out. But his grin was extra big as he went out the door, and you can be sure mine was, too.

For Reading

A reading center is a place in the classroom where children may read for pleasure, find information, practice specific skills, keep their own reading records, read to each other or the teacher, or do anything else which the class and teacher decide is appropriate.

A bookshelf, or something to serve as a partial partition, provides some privacy. A table and chairs, bookshelves, magazine racks, and a bulletin board are basic equipment. Children may want to develop various files for pictures, pamphlets, records, etc. If possible, provide a rug and a comfortable (if old) easy chair or sofa. Many people like to

read while lying on the floor or curled up in a big chair. Stock as many kinds of books as possible, including those written by the children. Reference and resource books for all subjects can be kept in the center. Magazines for reference and magazines to cut up also can be kept here.

Experiment with various ways to keep reading records. A teacher who individualizes reading instruction must develop her own system of record-keeping. (Stars on a chart are *not* a meaningful record.) Each child also can learn to keep his own record. A file box with a card for each child, where he may record title, author, and (if he chooses) a comment may be used by everyone in the class, including the teacher. Here a child sees his own record, sees titles which interest him, and can ask other children for recommendations. The teacher can easily discuss reading casually with a child, or talk about a book which several children have read with them privately or as a panel report to the class. A volunteer aide or the teacher can do the writing for young children.

A small bulletin board gives everyone a place to display visual or written "reports," to leave notes recommending books, or to write requests for specific information. One teacher waits until several children have read a particular book and posts a chart titled *Meet the Critics*. The book jacket is placed in the center and from it radiate strands of colored yarn attached to cards, each headed: *Betsy Says, Joel Says*, etc.

Many teachers bring metropolitan or neighborhood newspapers to the reading center. Older children can read them, or the teacher can use them for reference as she reads selections to younger children. In addition, a file of practice materials, selected from commercial sources or designed by the teacher, can be used by children at the teacher's request or on their own. Practice in visual and auditory discrimination; word-building, word recognition, and word meanings; or comprehension and interpretation can be undertaken by individuals or small groups.

In addition to being a place for independent study, the center is a good setting for the teacher to work. She can enhance her professional image by keeping some of her professional books and periodicals there, so that the children see her referring to adult materials, designed to help her be a good teacher. Education is one of the few professions in which practitioners are not surrounded by their professional books. Children have a right to see their teachers as students and scholars.

A teacher of young retarded children (ages 5 to 8) uses a comfortable and attractive reading center for many activities. One involves a group, with a child "reading leader," which practices reading a previously dictated experience story in preparation for reading it to the class. At first, the leader goes to the teacher many times for help and the group can work for only two or three minutes. But by spring, they can work independently for as long as 20 minutes. Each week the teacher meets

with the leaders for that week to evaluate the activity, discuss problems, and suggest additional items to be placed in the reading center.

A group of primary teachers felt that there were many possibilities of which they were not aware for using magazines. They had collected a variety of periodicals for their reading centers, but little was being done with them. They attended a summer workshop after experimenting in their classrooms for several months and pooled these suggestions:

1. Ask children to look for pictures of one subject. These are mounted on a bulletin board, pasted on a sheet of wrapping paper, etc. The more the better.

   Faces—Which might be children your age? Grandmothers? Fathers? Mothers? People at work?

   Objects with Wheels—Which have you seen? How are they alike? Different?

   Buildings—Do any look like schools? Government buildings? Churches? Homes? Stores? Factories? What else? Rearrange them by categories.

   Cars—How many have you seen? Why are there so many kinds? Which would you like to own? Where would you go in it?

   Flowers, Trees, Animals—whatever is pertinent at the time.
2. Ask children to look for objects that are sets and paste them on the appropriate poster for that set. Try to get a variety.
3. Ask children to look for objects they cannot identify and paste them on wrapping paper, labeled "What in the world is this?" Search for the answers.
4. Display several pictures with the question, "What do these have in common?" For example, an ocean wave, a windmill, a motor, an athlete throwing a ball, a boy riding a bicycle.
5. Put several pictures in an envelope with the directions, "Put these in any order you like and tell (or write) a story about them." Variation: children look for three or more pictures which tell a story.
6. Mount the first and last sentences of a paragraph on a card. The student writes the middle.
7. Cut out large words with the directions, "What can you say (or write) using these words?"
8. Show the class your picture file. Invite interested students to look for additional pictures for any category.
9. Collect colored pictures for a collage.
10. Look for pictures with two people. Display one of the pictures and suggest that two students compose a conversation. Such a picture also initiates simple role playing. The teacher says, "I'm going to be this boy—who will be the other one?" She initiates a conver-

sation; action is not necessary unless it is spontaneous. Soon two children can "play the parts."

A reading center should be open all day, including before and after school. In traditional classrooms many children come to believe that reading is what they do during the 20 minutes they are in "their group." An open center signals that the teacher is "hooked on books" and appreciates all efforts children make to read. The center is a place to study, do research, browse, or just sit and think, surrounded by books.

For Writing

A writing center may be very small—a table and two or three chairs. A box or basket with a variety of papers of different sizes and colors; an attractive container with many kinds of pencils, felt pens, and crayons; paste; a stapler; some kind of dictionary or word box; and a primary typewriter are the basic tools. Just as a reading center is not the only place in the room for reading, of course a writing center is just one place to write.

Here a young child may dictate a story to the teacher, the teacher aide, or an older student from another classroom. Many older children can write their own stories. Here they tackle one of the most difficult skills, because writing involves a double abstraction. It is a skill seldom used at home, and is extremely perplexing for a teacher to evaluate. Lou LaBrant, a respected language arts specialist, says, "Perhaps [this] is the hardest thing a human being can do—organize his thinking and record it on paper."

Authors of all ages need audiences. Young authors should find audiences in their teachers, classmates, children in other classes (younger and older), and at home. Also, many children dislike original writing because each effort must be completed and graded. They soon learn that copying and re-copying a story is boring. Why shouldn't they work as authors do? If each child has a folder in a file at the writing center, he can file fragments, incomplete work, and completed but unpolished stories. From his file he can select material to rework for a variety of purposes:

- To read to a small group of classmates
- To read to the entire class
- To tape record
- To send to children in another class or school
- To be duplicated and sent to parents
- To be included in a book for the reading center
- To put up on the bulletin board
- To include in his work sample folder, to be discussed at a teacher-parent conference
- To include in a class anthology whose title might be *Young American Authors*

From time to time the children can go through their folders and discard everything they no longer want. The teacher can read pieces and suggest those she thinks could be developed. She also can select pieces that illustrate common writing problems to discuss with a group or the entire class (the overhead projector is a useful tool for this). Reading a child's original writing or using it to make a point in class is done only with the author's permission. In some classes children write directions to the teacher such as "Just for you," "If you read this don't tell my name," "I want the class to hear this," etc.

Many teachers schedule a quiet time each day when everyone who wants to write may do so. A teacher can confer with individuals at the writing center during this time. The center also is available during the day for children who wish to work there independently.

A suggestion from the teacher may be taped to the table now and then to stimulate production. Here are a few ideas which have encouraged children to write:

1. Pretend you are a radio newscaster. Select a story in the *Weekly Reader* and condense it into two sentences for the six o'clock news.
2. The blue box has four things in it. Ask someone to blindfold you, feel the things, and then write about them. (A mask with the eyeholes covered can be used instead of a blindfold.)
3. Can you write a story which will make someone in our room laugh?
4. Write a story that doesn't end so we can have fun making up different endings for it.
5. There are new pictures in the folder today. Is there one which tells you a story?
6. Here is a shell (peanut, candle, spool, etc.). Write your own description after you study it carefully.
7. On your way to school this morning, did you see or hear or feel or smell or think something special? Try to write about it.
8. Most stories are written in straight lines and we read them from left to right. Can you make your story look some other way?

A teacher of children 8 to 10 years old made a magic pencil for the writing center. This was a large mailing tube, whose cap at the end could be detached. In the "pencil" were slips with many subjects on them; the "magic" was to select one to write about. Both teacher and children contributed to the collection, which was changed often. The directions posted by the pencil read:

YOUR MAGIC PENCIL

1. Handle carefully. *It is magic!*
2. Take off the magic eraser.

3. Reach in until you touch the magic papers.
4. Pull one out gently, and push the others back in.
5. Put the magic eraser back on.
6. Read the paper and write the magic story hidden in it.
7. File your story, even if it is not finished.

Some of the slips read:

I was an ant for a day
Magic medicine
My talking dog
A kingdom beneath the sea
The guest who was a witch
Strange neighbors
A great candid camera stunt
Time tunnel
Danger!
The time my hair turned green
If I ran this school
I was invisible for 24 hours
The insect that ruled the world

Children at a sixth grade writing center found a letter one day from a kindergarten teacher: "We are running out of good stories. Will some of you visit us and find out what kinds of stories we really like? Perhaps you'll want to write some for us." More than half of the sixth graders accepted this invitation, and some worked for two months writing and illustrating books. They held many discussions with each other, and often worked at the writing center in groups of twos and threes, each acting as a friendly but severe critic. When an author was satisfied with his creation he made an appointment with the kindergarten teacher to read it to the children. His enchanted audience was his exciting reward. When he returned to his own class, everything stopped while his classmates questioned him about how it went.

Such language arts specialists as Ramon Ross, Walter Cahill, and Richard Forsythe suggest that one of the folders in the writing center file be reserved for the teacher. Children see the teacher writing directions, reports, notes to parents, but they seldom, if ever, see her writing anything original. As she participates she will demonstrate that writing is important and satisfying. She also will be more aware of the creative act which she hopes will do so much for the children.

A writing center motivates, stimulates, and dignifies original writing. It encourages singularly independent thought and action. It moves toward the goals expressed by these writers:

"A teacher never really teaches creative writing; she merely releases and directs it." — *Mauree Applegate*

"There is a difference in writing something to be evaluated and something to be communicated." — *E. Paul Torrance*

"The child's initial writing, as well as his continuing to write, derives from the climate of the room that the teacher establishes. This climate emanates from the teacher's relationship to the children." — *Flora Arnstein*

Extending Choices to Increase Independent Skills

Putting aside a special time for choice-making skills or setting up learning centers is neither the beginning nor the end of wise choice-making. How many choices are you making which the children could make themselves? Or advise you about? In how many ways can you extend their choices, refine their purposes, point them toward enriched academic and social skills?

Adults offer children many pseudo-choices. "Would you like to stop working now?" can mean "I want you to stop, and will insist that you do." "You may sit wherever you like as long as you don't talk to each other" suggests that good friends had better stay as far apart as possible. These pseudo-choices can create unfortunate confusion in children's minds.

Teachers from several elementary schools, interested in the learning potential of choice-making, formed a study group. They formulated plans, tried them out, and reported to each other. Here, in their words, are some of their successful ventures:

1. I produced a work sheet with eight items for reinforcing a reading lesson. It began, "Dear Friends: Here is some work which will help you remember our lesson today. I know that all of you need to complete the first and second exercises. After that select one more—the one you believe will be best for you. Sincerely, Mr. K."
2. I wrote 12 problems on the board and said to the class, "These problems all give you practice in division. Work as many as you need to. When you understand them, stop working. Some of you may need to work only one, some may need to work more, and possibly some will decide they need to work all 12. The important thing is to stop when you understand this process."
3. I checked out several filmstrips about community helpers from the materials center and asked our classroom materials committee to preview them. They selected the ones they thought would best answer the questions we had raised.
4. Our room is too small for all of the things we want to do. A group of children cut a rectangle to scale and then cut simple shapes to represent all of our desks, tables, cupboards, etc. Almost every child spent some concentrated time placing the pieces this way and that, and finally we selected a floor plan to try. It was a great improvement over my arrangement. We now follow this procedure whenever we want to rearrange some or all of our furniture.
5. When I make my monthly trip to the library to select books for our class I take a "book panel" of four with me. I begin with the first four children on my roll; by the end of the year, everyone has helped me choose books. I can't begin to tell you all of the exciting things that happen during our trips and in our class. Whatever made me think I knew enough about my children to make the best possible selection?

Choices are often accompanied by pain, as every teacher knows and every child needs to learn. Here is an excerpt from the log of a first grade teacher who developed a year-long action research project on the relation of freedom to academic learning:

> *September 18*—Tomorrow we begin to paint. We have a corner where three children can paint at one time, and we have examined the paints, brushes, and easel paper.
>
> I asked the class how we could decide who would paint first. "Take turns—you keep a list and give everybody turns," were initial responses. I asked, "Who will be the first three?" Every hand shot up and they talked to

each other and me in an excited way. Shortly they became quiet and we tackled the problem. They finally agreed to meet in three groups and choose one from each group.

Their heads were together for seven minutes and then I called for a report. Each group reported no agreement and much argument. I asked if they wanted to return to the groups and choose someone who *needed* a first choice for any reason—to feel better or whatever. Several thought they could, and Danny, high on the first sociometric ladder, said, "I would choose Peter."

By now it was time for lunch. I said, "Think it over and we'll see how things stand at one o'clock." As they came in from lunch, they surrounded me and there was a chorus of, "You do it, Mrs. N." To check, I asked for hands of those who wanted me to choose. Every one went up high. To be sure, I asked for hands of those who wanted to try to make choices. No hands. "Will you be satisfied with anyone I choose?" I asked. Apparently relieved, everyone said yes.

As you think about extending children's opportunities for practice in making choices, the following should be taken into consideration in striking a balance between your choices and theirs:

Skills: What skills does each child or group of children need to practice? Following printed directions? Organizing ideas? Mastering subject content? Listening with discrimination? Developing motor control? Whatever the skills, design activities which provide for some choices within the skill.

Expression: Is each child comfortable about expressing his ideas and emotions? Begin with his strengths and gradually add experiences in other modes of expression. Every child deserves a time and place to express himself through talking and being listened to, through writing, rhythms, games, dance, pencils, crayons and paints, dough and wire, wood and metal—in as many ways as possible.

Exploration: Are there a lot of things in your room to see, hear, feel, and savor? Things which can be put together and taken apart?

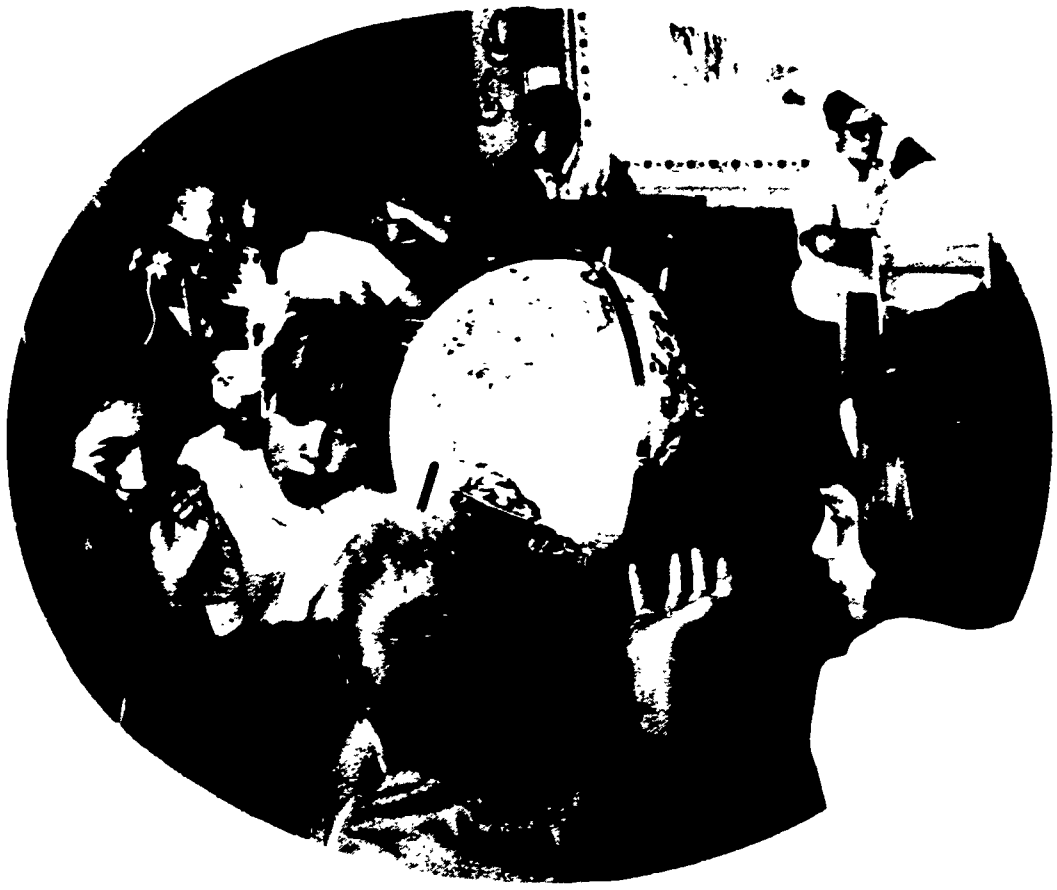
Living Creatures: Have the children explored every square foot of the school, indoors and out? The neighborhood? The sky and the wind? Are there animals in the room to observe and care for? Even children who have made few choices before at school will be conquered by curiosity as they observe, explore, test, and manipulate.

Imagination: What will cause children to wonder why, to imagine what would happen if? To ask "How come it works like that?" Many teachers ask a lot of dull questions, questions which deservedly elicit "Yes" or "No" in dull unison.

Encouragement: Is there time to say "Oh, that's easy!"? To enjoy repeating a skill, now mastered, which was so hard at first? To recollect, "I couldn't do that last year, but I can now!" As teachers we are so pleased when a child masters one skill that we are eager to have him move on to the next. However, it is gratifying to have a chance to stand still once in awhile and enjoy your learning. Or even go back a bit and redo with great ease what was once a tough job.

Solitude: Is there a place in your room where a child can be alone? A corner where he is hidden by a bookcase or screen and can sit in a comfortable chair or rocker? Mauree Applegate once said that every person needs some white space in each day—time to sit, to dream, to woolgather, to be quiet and alone. For many children, school will be the only place for this. If they can learn to enjoy a quiet time alone, they will not become adults with a horror of being without people or a transistor radio or television set.

All current predictions on the subject point to more and more leisure time for working adults. Although educators agree that accumulating soon-to-be-obsolete facts will do little or nothing to produce productive, responsible citizens, we are only beginning to teach in ways that may create these citizens. Each time a child proves to himself that he is becoming more confident, capable, reliant, or independent, he is striding toward successful adulthood.



Maintaining Control

A college English teacher recently said, "The student, as I see him, is put in a position where the main thing he learns is to follow orders, now. And I have my doubts about how much else he learns, particularly when you consider how much time he spends in school. . . . If I were to ask my students to do some silly thing—to go to the library and pick 10 books off the shelf, write down the first word in each book and then write the words backwards—they'd do it." Is he right? Is obedience to school and teacher-made room rules placed first? Is conformity our goal? Or are teachers working toward developing responsible, self-directing learners?

Rules are necessary, of course. But we must ask ourselves, which ones? Are they understood? Are they reasonable? As children master them, are they discarded? Is a rule on a classroom chart ever crossed off? How do children interpret "always" and "never"? In what situations do children need your presence, your guidance, your remonstrance? Which ones can they handle alone?

How many child-hours are wasted standing in line? When is standing in line really necessary? You wonder when you visit a school where the teacher in the yard tells the flag bearer that it is time for school to begin, or that recess is over. The child gets a large flag and walks slowly across the yard and back. The eager children come running to get back to class. Others are slower, but they are all in their rooms in less time than if they were waiting for the boys' line to get quiet.

Responsibility for your own behavior takes a lifetime to learn, but each year children can move ahead. They need a lot of time to experiment, to discuss, to explore their feelings about rules. Which ones are easy for you? Which are hard? Are there some you don't understand? Are you sure which rules adults at the school make and which ones you have some say about?

Margaret, a 9-year-old, was assigned three questions to answer as after-school punishment. She wrote:

> "Why I can't seem to mind and obey school rules is because I talk. I don't listen because I don't pay attention. Every time I put my hand, elbow, pencil, crayon or anything on his desk I don't mean to its accidently. Why should I do the right thing? I should learn this so I can be smart obeident and strickly good. What am I going to do about it? I am going to pay attention, be obeident and most of all study hard. I shall try to be good and remember all the rules."

With this perception of rules, Margaret will soon be in the same trouble. What is needed is time for Margaret, the teacher, and the other children to clarify what is expected.

Children soon learn the right words about school conduct. Listen to a first grade teacher on the first day of school as she asks the children what rules they will need. Already they know what she wants them to say. Why can't standards be built as situations arise? Standards with many illustrations so that the children can generalize their operational meanings?

Teachers are kind and well-mannered, so they often mask rules and orders in ways which puzzle children until they learn to translate the polite words. "Wouldn't it be nice if we all listened now?" Or "I like the way Timmy is sitting up and listening." Or "I can't talk if someone else is talking." If the teacher becomes the major or sole source of gratification, children are deprived of learning to internalize control.

Rules which make school life better for everyone, which enhance opportunities to learn, which are open to revision, can be understood by children. Here is one discussion out of many which helped first grade children become more responsible for their own behavior:

Teacher: Lately we have had some trouble remembering and keeping rules here at school. What would you say is the hardest rule for boys and girls to keep at school?

Don: To come in when the bell rings.
Joe: It's hard to keep the balls out of the grass and where they belong.
Sonia: The kids don't get to their seats when the bell rings and they come in.
Billy: When there is a fire drill it's kinda hard to stop talking.
Barbara: Not to hide in the closet.
Carla Jean: Not to make mistakes on the book.
Cheryl: We should remember not to hide and not to make a noise when the teacher steps out of the room.
Don: Not get into things on the teacher's desk when she says no.
Billy: Especially the stapler.
Joe: And when it looks like it would be fun.
Teacher: Do you have any suggestions as to how the boys and girls could remember to keep the rules?
Dane: I think we could just remember. The kids who do remember could tell those that don't remember.
Joe: If they didn't know what to do, they could go to their seat and do something.
Carla Jean: When our job is finished, we can get something to play with.
Teacher: Are there any rules that don't make sense to you?
Billy: Like today, when I had to work in my workbook, I got sore because I wanted to finish my building project.
Diane: We would rather not do so much work.
Joe: They could walk in and sit down and wait until you tell them to do something. That makes sense. The reason they forget, they have fun at home and forget everything and think they are babies and at school we have to act different.
Teacher: Why do we have to act differently at school than at home?
Joe: Because they might hurt somebody and might trip somebody if they monkey around or bump their heads. They can have fun at home but at school there are too many things around.
Carla Jean: If you have a rope, they might not know it and trip over it.
Billy: It is not nice to set traps in the house if you have a little brother, like you put a rope and tie it to the closet and he trips over it. I never do this to my brother. He might get a broken arm.
Joe: If somebody had a bat and they wanted to swing it, they might crack someone's head open.
Sonia: One day I was playing carry ball with my friends and a boy named Ricky and Danny had a long rope and when I went home they put it up and I tripped over it.

Primary responsibility for independence and autonomy as a learner belongs to an individual. But because he learns about himself through

interaction with others, groups are important to his development. In one day, or one week, children at school work and play in many groupings, each with the potential to help them grow in self-understanding and self-direction.

"Large group, small group, individual instruction" became one of the slogans of recent reformers of secondary school organization. Many elementary schools picked up the phrase, and it became a rigid formula for some faculties. It was assumed that every student needed prescribed amounts of time in large groups, in small groups, and studying alone. However, if children are to assess themselves as learners, teachers should arrange many flexible groupings. Children should be consulted about which learning tasks they do best alone, with the teacher or aide, with one other student, or with a small or large group. Their assessment, plus the teacher's judgment, will produce optimum learning situations.

Here are suggestions from children in grades four, five, and six about working in groups: All were tried and most were successful.

> Two of us will select stories to read to each other.
>
> Too many kids are trying for perfect papers all the time. We'll work together to evaluate our work and then each kid will select his best work to hand in.
>
> At each table we'll discuss the news of the day and agree on what we want to report to the class. This will keep current events from being so boring.
>
> We want a sharing time so we can talk about anything we want to with our friends.
>
> After a TV lesson we want time to talk it over and decide if we have questions we need to ask our teacher.
>
> Each week, one person in our group will dictate the spelling words. That week he doesn't have to take the test.
>
> Each table will write a description of an imaginary animal. Then we'll exchange these and another table will have to draw it.
>
> We can practice Spanish better in small groups. We'll take turns being the teacher because you learn a lot when you are the teacher.
>
> Each week let the ones who want to select one story from their writing folder to read to the table group. Maybe there will be one we'd like the whole class to hear.
>
> We'd like to plan a science experiment to present to the class.
>
> Let each table have a turn planning the game schedule. Our table would like to surprise everyone and teach them a new game next week.

Some people believe that group action eliminates individual choice. In developing independent learners there is no problem of group *vs.* individual. The wide range of groupings possible in school gives individuals rich opportunities to learn which ones are not possible in static situations, such as reading groups which seldom change personnel, and which ones allow for maximum flexibility. Much of the world's work is accomplished cooperatively, and the best preparation for this is learning to become yourself in and out of groups.

Evaluating the Growth of Children

Independent learning is so complex that no one fully understands its components. But every teacher knows enough about children and enough about learning to make some headway in finding out where each child is and to develop plans to move each one in the direction of growing independence.

A teacher of 8 and 9-year-olds began by deciding that she needed to know when each child thought he needed help from the teacher and when he felt he could work alone. She invited a consultant to interview the children in sociometric groups of four or five. The children were asked to make sociometric choices in response to the teacher's explanation that they would discuss some of their opinions about school with a visitor. The teacher would then use their opinions to help her plan better ways for everyone to work.

The questions asked of each group were:

1. What do you study in school this year?
2. What school work is easiest for you? Hardest? Why?
3. When do you ask Mrs. M to help you?
4. What work do you do by yourself?
5. What can you do in school now that you couldn't do last year?

The children were animated and serious in their discussions. Each group talked for at least a half hour and one continued for more than an hour.

In talking about asking the teacher for help, almost every child indicated that he made an effort before he requested assistance:

"If I'm stuck for quite a while on a hard word, I ask her what it is."

"In my new workbook I couldn't figure out how to put the number on whether it is true or not, so Mrs. M had to show me."

"Carrying in math is hard for me. When we have it, I ask for help almost every time."

"The first time we had a puzzle that went down and across, man, it was crazy. I really had to get help with that."

"Sometimes I don't understand what I'm supposed to do on a work sheet, but not very often."

"I don't get syllables very good. I really don't know how long Mrs. M will have to work on me."

Many children saw the introduction of something new as a time for needing help:

"When we were just starting with our cursive writing, she showed us every little thing on the board."

"If our teacher learns a new way to paint she does it on her own paper and we all watch."

"She really knows how to make some neat designs."

"Frank and Mrs. M danced 'La Raspa' first to show us how to do it."

Several children appreciated personal attention:

"When I got 'Believe and Make Believe' it was so hard I didn't even want to keep it. But Mrs. M said I could read it and she helped me so much that I did. I've almost finished it."

"I really got bad grades in spelling. I don't remember how she helped me but I'm getting more hundreds all the time. Maybe she just took more time with me."

Everyone agreed that any child who liked freedom could help another:

"We get paper or everything by ourselves and we help each other pick out the books we want to read."

"Mrs. M explains the hard parts to me but if she is busy, Leonard will tell me how."

"We can all talk to our neighbors and help each other. At my other school we weren't allowed to do that."

And even the best efforts do not always succeed:

"I'll never learn division. It mixes me up every time."

"She helped us and helped us so much but I still don't understand the moon so very well."

These 8's and 9's beamed as they explained what they can do on their own:

"We can all use our tape recorder. Pat's group did a whole play all by theirselves. Mrs. M didn't even know we did it until we played it for the class."

"A science experiment is best when you do it alone. My best one was with the black and white paper and the mirror and the flashlight. That was neat!"

"If one guy has a ball and another guy wants it they don't have to run to Mrs. M. They figure it out. In the other rooms they run to the teacher."

"I love to do my spelling all by myself."

"Most of the time I can do all of the work without any help."

"This morning Mrs. M worked a sample problem on the board and every single kid done the rest of 'em, and Mrs. M didn't have a thing to do."

It was fascinating to hear them as they reflected on the last question —what they can do in school now that they couldn't do last year:

"A bunch of stuff in math—like 1649 divided by 8."

"Try to pronounce words even if they're hard. And I can look them up in the dictionary. I can even tell other kids some hard words they don't know."

"Did you ever see a book called 'The Way We Go?' It's got a lot of poems in it. Last year I didn't know poems were fun."

"I can write the longest story you ever saw."

"I never did make designs before. We all make 'em but mine are more funnier."

"I can cross the bars three times and I'm good in handball and kickball. We are all good in dodgeball and baseball. Last year I guess we weren't careful enough to play 'em good."

"I understand practically everything about rockets, especially how they shoot them. But I've got to find out how they get down."

"Last year I couldn't even spell words like mother and father."

"Now I can work longer at one thing."

"This year Al taught me how to play tetherball and now I never get in trouble with the yard teacher."

"I know eleven African words and three African songs."

"I have different friends. I guess you forget your old ones but I have lots more than last year."

"I can talk to the teacher a lot more. She has fun names for us. If I have a worry I can tell her."

And Karma summarized when she sighed and then said, "You know, it's hard to figure out. But when we do school work it should be about half the teacher and half us. We can do a lot more things this year but we still need our teacher to help us."

The children reacted enthusiastically to the invitation to think and talk about themselves as learners. The teacher was reinforced in some of her hunches and had many new clues for next steps to take with individuals.

Another approach was used by two teachers who spent a year planning a two-year experiment. This involved 70 children, 9 to 11 years old, who would spend two years with these two teachers. (A partition between two standard classrooms was replaced with accordion doors.)

One of the important goals was increasing the level of responsibility each child would assume for his learning. The teachers read widely on this subject, visited a number of experimental schools, worked with several consultants, and finally concluded that they would have to chart their own path along the dependent-independent spectrum.

One of the preparatory activities was talking with parents in the spring before the project began. An agenda item for each conference was parental assessment: "Do you see your child as more or less independent than the other children you know? Or is he about the same?" The current teachers of the children were asked the same questions.

A month after school had started the next fall, the teachers invited the principal and two consultants to work with them in continuing their assessment. The name of each child was written on a card. Independently, the two teachers selected the most and least dependent children at either end. Between these children they placed the other cards. For the most part they agreed, but they discussed the exceptions until they reached consensus as follows:

Most dependent							Least dependent
1	5	11	36	11	5	1	

They then asked each consultant to select three children to observe without revealing the names to them. It was agreed that the consultants could come at any time and observe each child for 15 to 20 minutes, trying to see them in as many situations as possible. After each of the six children had been observed at least five times, the consultants met with the teachers and principal to "reveal" their subjects and share their written observations.

The discussions which followed led to interviews with the six observed children and two others who intrigued the teachers because of changes in their behavior (one had "blossomed" and one seemed to lean more and more on the teachers for support). Questions were designed to get information which the teachers believed they most needed. The following responses to these questions will give you an idea of what the teachers wanted to know and the variety of answers:

What kinds of kids are called on most often by the teacher? "Our teachers call on just about anybody but our Spanish teacher just calls on the ones she knows." "Those who raise their hands." "The smart ones. You know the fifth graders take a test and some sixth graders correct them—just certain ones like I named. They feel bad because they never get to correct tests."

What kinds of things at school do you do all on your own? "Committees. I was on health, the brain. Maybe a few times we get to do what we want in art." "Science. I like to learn like what's inside of us and like how a flower grows." "In free time I do my math. Free time is to catch up on work you haven't done. If I was all caught up I'd practice on something I wasn't good in."

Can you think of a time recently when you needed help from your teacher and he could give it? "I think it was in spelling. We were supposed to put meanings of key words. I didn't know how to do that and Mr. K came over and helped me." "In math workshop, a real hard problem. We could not figure it out but Mr. S helped us."

A time when he could not? What did you do? "No. I'd read the text or ask the other teacher." "Reading. Sometimes I'd ask someone else—someone smarter than me."

A time when you had something important to say and you weren't called on? "It was in science. You feel bad if you're not asked when you have a good answer." "Yes. I feel kinda mad because I want to contribute. But you can't always get called on." "I *never* like to raise my hand. I'm afraid the answer might be wrong. I'm going to try pretty soon."

A teacher who has set up the sort of daily independent activity period described earlier in this book should be ready to keep some systematic records after several days, or even weeks, of experimenting. If she is working with an aide or an intern, she is fortunate because the two of them can work together to determine the kind of record which will be most useful. Or she may invite a consultant or administrator to spend an hour or two a week as recorder. (It is also helpful to keep a record of what individual children do; this is possible if two or three children are observed closely during each day's activities.) Such tabulation can be a very useful first step in evaluation.

The Head Start teacher whose class was described earlier asked a district consultant to tabulate the choices of her children every five minutes during their 50 minute independent activity time. The resulting participation chart looked like this:

	10:00	10:05	10:10	10:15	10:20	10:25	10:30	10:35
Listening	0	2	2	3	3	3	1	2
Playhouse	2	0	2	0	0	2	1	2
Pipe assembly	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	1
Large blocks	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Puzzles	1	0	1	0	0	2	1	1
Driver wheel	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1
Library	0	0	1	2	2	0	3	2
Production— Christmas cards	8	8	2	2	2	1	2	2
Production— Play dough	-	-	-	-	2	2	2	2
Production— Decorating cookies	0	0	3	3	3	2	1	0
Watching	2	1	0	3	1	1	0	0

Any teacher who is curious about how children see themselves as learners will add systematically to casual observations. In these examples, other professionals were asked to help, but this is not necessary. The important thing is to experiment with your own ways of assessing children's behavior and to help them become aware of their problems and progress in becoming increasingly independent learners.

Looking at Yourself and Your School

Perhaps the most promising development in our profession today is teacher self-evaluation. No longer must we guess at our effectiveness, or depend on the reports of sporadic raters. Audio and video tapes now provide data for systematic self-evaluation of behavior which the individual teacher wishes to assess.

A number of evaluation systems are now available for teachers who wish to analyze any aspect of their own teaching. These aspects include verbal interaction, classroom climate, methodology, learning objectives, and the teacher's verbal and nonverbal behavior. Criteria for judging an effective self-appraisal system are listed below.

1. Can any teacher using the system readily understand others using it? The system's goals and limitations should be commonly understood.

2. Can the teaching behaviors included in the system be recorded regularly and systematically? The record can be kept on a chart, checklist, video tape, audio tape, or whatever is required.

3. Is an analysis of the data useful to the teacher? No matter how significant it is to the person who developed the system or to researchers, it must help the teacher improve her teaching.

4. Does the teacher have access to appropriate assistance whenever she wishes to modify or develop a teaching skill? Some evaluation systems have new skills built into them.

5. Having mastered the system, is the teacher free to adapt or expand it to meet her needs for continuing education?

Once a teacher decides what is to be analyzed, she needs to make a 10-15 minute audio or video tape once or twice a month. Using a system which she has mastered, she can analyze her own tape or invite another teacher, principal, or consultant to add an independent analysis. She can then work to enhance her teaching strengths, modify specific techniques, or add to her teaching repertoire. Anyone interested in developing independent learners will find self-evaluation an exciting way to assess her current teaching style and move toward her goals for all her children.

Another important factor in independent learning is school organization. A teacher who is dedicated to providing a setting where children can grow in independence is severely handicapped unless she teaches in a school in which independence is valued for staff as well as pupils. Is decision-making shared? The principal who works effectively with an advisory panel, elected by the faculty, demonstrates his belief in independent action. He does not even need to attend the panel's meetings unless requested, and the chairman may report to him only at the request of the group.

Through its advisory group, a faculty can set budget priorities, establish guidelines, and make instructional and curriculum decisions. The principal is a specialist in organization and communication, whose role enables the teachers to make decisions with confidence.

The existence of a student council signals confidence in children's ability to make decisions. An effective council is not a junior police department; it is a representative group with clear-cut and realistic responsibilities for making the school a good place for every student. The simplest possible procedures insure its effectiveness in assessing the school's strengths and needs, gathering data for problem-solving, and learning responsibility toward the people one represents.

A school with as few rules as possible, all realistic and enforceable, creates a climate which encourages each teacher to work in an open way with students. A school without bells, one whose staff works to reduce

jumpiness and tension, is a place where everyone can try to be productive. And a principal who recognizes differing needs for dependence in staff members encourages them, in turn, to diagnose their students' needs. A competent, caring teacher can work in most settings but has a much better chance to be effective in a school organized to develop independent thought and action.

Most important of all is individual commitment to continuing education as long as one is in the teaching profession. Alone and with the help of colleagues, each teacher must be responsible for diagnosing her strengths and needs, and for working toward a time when rich resources to develop these strengths and meet these needs will be readily available. As teachers reach their goals for professional responsibility and decision-making, their parallel goals for children will have a better chance of success.

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Mrs. Williams has written articles for a number of professional journals, is co-author of *Learning About Role Playing*, and was editor of *Six Areas of Teacher Competence* (published by the California Teachers Association). She served a term on the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, and is currently a member of the National Commission on Teacher Education and Professional Standards, National Education Association.

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