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ABSTRACT

Directed to the needs of teachers, this article explains the who, what, where, and why of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) system for providing the results of research and current topics in education to practitioners. Included is basic information on Resources in Education (RIE) and Current Index to Journals in Education (CIJE), the ERIC indexing and abstracting publications; the Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors; the ERIC collection of original documents reproduced on microfiche; and computer facilities for online searching. Estimates of annual costs to subscribers are included, as well as directions for submitting reports, speeches, and other papers to the ERIC system and a list of nine free publications describing the system; e.g., how to start an ERIC collection, bibliographies of publications about ERIC, directories of collections and services, and listings of information analysis products. (HAA)

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ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS ASK

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by

Henrietta Wexler

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All You Have To Do is Ask

The ERIC information system can lead you through the maze of education research as fast as you can think of questions, and you can learn to use it in an afternoon

By Henrietta Wexler

Dolores Doright sank down into the faculty lounge couch. "How am I ever going to do right by them?" she sighed.

"Do right by whom, Dolores?" asked Marian Librarian, looking up from her cup of tea and a book.

"Those learning disabled children who're coming into my class next term. How can I find out all I want to know about learning disabilities in such a short time?"

"Why don't you see what ERIC can come up with," suggested Marian.

"Eric who? Oh, you mean the system that keeps track of education documents. I don't have time to mess with that complicated business. It's much more fun browsing through card catalogs—but I don't have time for that, either."

"Tell you what," offered Marian. "Meet me in the media center today after three o'clock and I'll introduce you to ERIC. Once you get to know the system, you'll forget about card catalogs."

"What can I lose?" agreed Dolores. "I'm desperate."

At 3:15 Dolores Doright walked up to Marian behind the checkout counter of the school library and challenged her. "Show me. I warn you, though, I don't take to Buck Rogers gadgets—I don't think I'll ever feel comfortable with them."

"Don't worry," Marian reassured her. "All you have to do is tell me what you're looking for. I'll handle the gadget."

"Well, I want to find out everything I can about learning disabilities."

"Everything? Hold on. If I feed learning disabilities into the computer, it'll probably come up with thousands of titles—articles, research reports, books, film. Can we narrow that down?"

"Dolores thought a moment.

"Okay. First I need to know how to identify a learning disability."

"Fine. Identification of learning disabilities," Marian jotted it down. "What else?"

"Then I'd like to know how to deal with learning disabled children in a regular classroom."

"Good. Mainstreaming of learning disabled children. Anything else?"

"I'm not sure. I'd have to see what's available."

"Come with me to the *Thesaurus of Descriptors*," said Marian, leading the way.

"The what? Sounds like a prehistoric monster!"

"*Au contraire*, Dolores. It's a very up-to-date, alphabetic collection of key words and phrases," said Marian as she pulled a volume down from the shelves under the ERIC Collection sign. Let's see Learning disabilities. There. See the subcategories under it. Some broader, like *handicapped*. Some narrower, like *dyslexia*. What do you think?"

"How about *dyslexia*? I expect a few children who've been diagnosed dyslexic."

"Okay. I think those categories will get us a reasonable number of items from the computer. Oh, one more thing. How far back in time shall we go? ERIC's collection began in 1966, and it's got

over 400,000 items in the data base. If we don't limit the time frame, we'll be swamped."

"How about the past five years?"

Marian sat down at the computer terminal and tapped a few keys on the keyboard. In seconds, the screen filled up with lines of titles.

"Fantastic!" exclaimed Dolores.

"It tells me there are 39 documents dealing with the three topics we fed into the computer," announced Marian. "Do you want abstracts of all 39?"

"Sure, I think I can manage that—if they're only abstracts. Say, how does the computer do that?—I mean, come up with all that information so quickly? If I'd used the card catalogs, it would have taken hours, maybe days to find that many resources."

"It's a crossing technique based on Boolean logic principles. If you're familiar with Venn diagrams, you can picture the overlapping categories. But you don't have to understand how the computer is programmed. Just say *please*," Marian laughed.

"Okay, please, how do I get to see the abstracts of those 39 items?"

"There are two ways. One, I can get a printout of the ERIC document numbers of the items so you can look them up in the ERIC volumes and read the abstracts here in the library. Or, two, I can order a printout of those abstracts by mail and you can take them home to look over."

"Let's order them by mail so I can take them home. After I decide which full articles I want, what happens?"

"Step this way to our microfiche collection."

Ms. Wexler is Associate Editor for *American Education*.

The basic tools of ERIC can cost as little as \$140 a year, without computer facilities. And manual searches will lead to the same resources as a computer search.

"Micro-what? Some kind of sardines, ha ha"

"That's French for tiny memos," explained Marian as she pulled out of a drawer a 4" x 6" clear plastic rectangle with postage - stamp - size blocks imprinted on them. "Now follow me to the microfiche reader. You slip the microfiche into the slot, and presto!" As she turned a knob the machine's screen displayed: one after another, enlargements of the stamp-sized blocks so each could be read like a printed page. Now the rest is up to you. You can read each page, take notes, and tell me which pages, or whole documents you might want on paper.

"How do I get paper copies?"

"This machine will print out whatever pages you want so you can take them home, and mark them up to your heart's content.

"Great!" How much will that cost?"

"Ten cents a page."

"Sold—a bargain. Can't wait to get the abstracts so I can look them over and choose the ones I want."

"And that's all there is to it. Dolores, how do you feel about ERIC?"

"You were right, Marian. Browsing through card catalogs may be fun, but I can't afford that luxury any more. Gotta go now. How long will it take to get my abstracts?"

"A couple of days. I'll let you know as soon as the printout arrives."

That scenario, with minor variations, is played out every day in over 500 loca-

tions where computer search facilities provide access to the ERIC data base.

What is ERIC?

Education Resources Information Center has been around for 16 years. Some educators know it as a service for scholars and researchers in education. It is that, but far more important, ERIC puts the results of education research into the hands of classroom teachers, students, parents, or anyone with an interest in developments in education.

The nationwide system, supported by the National Institute of Education, consists of a central unit in Washington, D.C., and 16 clearinghouses, each focusing on a specific field of education. Each clearinghouse, with advice from a board of advisors, experts in their field, decides what goes into ERIC's data base. They find about half of the material submitted from a central processing facility and other sources suitable for entry into ERIC's retrieval system.

Resources in Education (RIE) is a monthly publication of abstracts of the nearly 1,400 documents that pass the ERIC clearinghouses' selection criteria. These include "fugitive" documents, which might never be seen by educators if not published in RIE, research reports, curriculum guides and materials, project descriptions, conference papers. The documents themselves are available on microfiche or in print copies for a small charge.

The *Current Index to Journals in Education* (CIJE), another monthly, contains abstracts of articles from over 700 education-related scholarly journals. Al-

though these articles are generally not available on ERIC's microfiche collection because of copyright law, CIJE directs the reader to the source.

In addition to collecting the literature of education for announcement in RIE and CIJE, the ERIC clearinghouses analyze and synthesize the literature into research reviews, bibliographies, state-of-the-art and interpretive studies. These Information Analysis Products are put into the ERIC system and announced in RIE. Many of them are also made available to interested groups through professional associations.

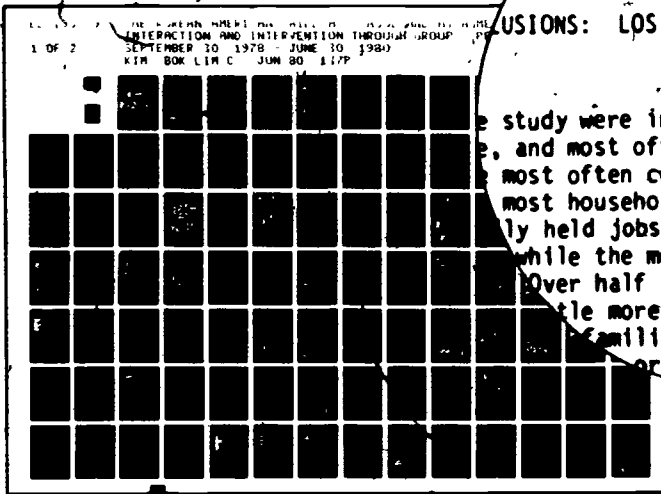
There are about 700 locations in the United States where ERIC microfiche collections are maintained—in many college and university libraries, in most state departments of education, and in more than 60 locations abroad.

What does ERIC cost?

A school library can subscribe to the basic tools of ERIC—the RIE and CIJE series—for as little as \$140 a year. (The *Thesaurus of Descriptors* mentioned in the opening dialog, while useful, is not essential.) A microfiche collection costs about \$2,000 a year to purchase. But this too can be done without, since most documents announced in RIE can be ordered by mail in either paper or microfiche. (About 17% are available only on microfiche.)

Computer facilities currently cost about \$1,500 a year. The average charge for a computer search like the one described in the opening dialog runs about \$25, a charge that many states or school districts will absorb for educators on the

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 be ill prepared to
 counter later, both in col



CONCLUSIONS: LOS ANGELES SAMPLE

The study were in their late 30s, usually
 and most often had a high-school or
 most often composed only of a nuclear
 most households both parents were em
 ly held jobs around the middle of th
 while the mothers were often empl
 Over half the respondents had b
 ttle more than one in ten ha
 families were intact,
 or relatives.

Each microfiche can hold up to 96 miniaturized pages, to be enlarged for easy reading on paper or on a display terminal

staff The search service, however, is open to anyone willing to pay for it. Manual searches, while slower, will lead the user to the same information and resources as a computer search.

Who uses ERIC?

Scholars and researchers depend on it. When a graduate student wants to know what's been done by others in the field, ERIC can quickly provide copies of documents produced by fellow researchers.

The Secretary of Education uses it. When the Secretary needs to know everything about a hot topic in education, his staffers search ERIC for copies of everything recently published on the subject—pro, con, and neutral.

And of course enterprising teachers and school administrators use it. Es-

pecially after school librarians like Marian introduce them to it.

Marian might have been one of 14 school librarians chosen by their state library associations last year to spend a two-week internship in Washington, D.C., learning about the vast storehouses of information housed in the nation's capital. According to Alan Moorehead, chief of NIE's Education Resource Center in Washington, the librarians returned to their home towns filled with evangelical zeal to spread the word about ERIC.

A few ERIC fans

Linda Goolsby, librarian at Rawlins Middle School in Rawlins, Wyoming, was one of those 14 librarian-interns who became ERIC boosters. In Wyoming, Goolsby says, schools can be 100 miles apart and as much as ten or 20 years behind in education technology and theories. With access to ERIC's data base through the University of Wyoming at Laramie, she has become an experienced ERIC "negotiator" for educators in her school district. (A negotiator helps a searcher narrow the scope and time frame of a quest for information, just as Marian helped Dolores.)

Goolsby recalls one teacher who was trying to cope with an influx of Indo-Chinese and Pakistani newcomers to the district. The material she found through ERIC, on the culture and customs of the children's native countries, helped smooth and hasten the acculturation process for the children.

Goolsby would like to see a much wider use of ERIC. "I've really done

some head-scratching about it," she says. "The microfiche equipment in Cheyenne isn't used as much as it would be if the equipment were available in each school district."

While the cost for fuller ERIC service is an obstacle in budget-cutting times, Goolsby continues to invite teachers in her district, through the district newsletter, to get acquainted with ERIC and keep up with the latest education research.

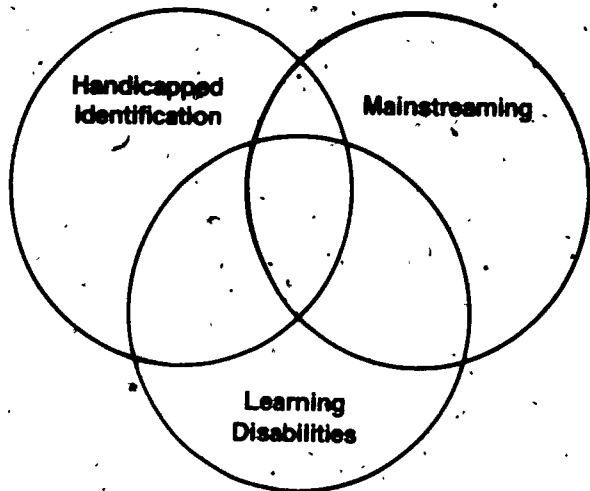
When Jill Leiker, an English teacher in Rifle, Colorado, returned to work after a few years off, she needed to know what was new in her field, so she searched ERIC during the summer before school opened. "I got tons of information—from complete programs to little hints I could use in teaching world literature."

When she searched for new methods for teaching remedial reading in secondary school, she found that her own methods hadn't yet been improved on. But she did find new reading materials that combined low vocabulary with high interest for teenagers.

In a state as large and relatively unpopulated as Colorado, says Leiker, "ERIC brings the education world to your front door." She, too, feels the system is under-used. One reason may be that too many teachers find it intimidating. "It would help," she believes, "to have instruction in using the microfiche reader." Leiker would also like to see a small portable microfiche



Livingston, Globe and Mail/Toronto



The process in either a manual or a computer search of the ERIC system can be illustrated by a Venn diagram. The searcher ends up with the articles, reports, etc. shown in the dark area where the three topics overlap.

reader so inexpensive that teachers could take it home and make paper copies of anything in the system.

Considering the dizzying rate of progress in electronic technology, Leiker's dream does not seem all that impossible.

Another graduate of the 1980 librarian-intern program, Judith Johnson went back to the Central High School library in Rapid City, South Dakota, with a gift subscription to RIE. She promptly set about spreading the news about ERIC not only in her own school but at statewide meetings. Besides writing for a statewide newsletter in order to reach school personnel beyond her library walls, on teacher inservice days each fall, Johnson gives ten-minute "awareness" talks about ERIC.

Using the computer facilities of the South Dakota state library system, she feels challenged to get the answer to any questions that come her way. "If they don't want me to do a whole master's thesis," quips Johnson, "we can get the information." She says searchers particularly find useful the volumes of *Information Analysis Products* published by the ERIC clearinghouses.

Johnson sees to it that literature describing ERIC's services is in plain sight in faculty lounges as well as in her library. She will remind her colleagues that other educators have grappled with the same problems they're confronted with, and chances are they can find workable solutions through ERIC.

James Jess, superintendent of the CAL (Coulter, Alexander, and Latimer) school district in Iowa, calls ERIC a "godsend." He first used the system while working on his doctoral thesis at Drake University.

three years PURE has grown to nearly 3,000 members nationwide.

According to Jess, 65 percent of the nation's schools are classified as rural, that is, located in communities of 2,500 population or less. Yet these schools are often burdened with regulations designed for large urban schools. Through lobbying efforts of a coalition of groups like PURE, in September 1980 Congress passed the Regulation Flexibility Act, exempting small school districts from having to comply with regulations intended for large ones.

Today Jess, as a member of the advisory board of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, not only evaluates material for possible inclusion in ERIC, but helps choose research priorities in the field of rural education.

Getting into ERIC

Someone wanting to contribute a report, speech, or paper to the ERIC data base sends two clear, legible copies to the ERIC Processing and Reference Facility, 4833 Rugby Avenue, Suite 303, Bethesda, MD 20014. The material is forwarded to the appropriate clearinghouse for screening. If it passes muster, it will be entered into the system. (If the material is copyrighted, include your address so a reproduction release form may be sent to you.)

In 1977, when his small school district was caught between declining enrollments and insufficient funds, 12 parents and four educators (including Jess) met in an Iowa farmhouse to create a voice for a large silent majority. They called their fledgling group PURE—People United For Rural Education.

Seeking "creative management" solutions for his troubled rural schools, Jess turned to ERIC. Through the Clearinghouse on Rural Education, he found out about meetings and conferences where problems of rural schools would be discussed and where he could get other rural educators to join PURE. In

In a large metropolitan school district that has had computer search facilities since the early '70s, the clientele becomes quite sophisticated, says Nina Allen, assistant to curriculum librarian Karen Dowling of the Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland. Educators in this Washington suburb now feel comfortable dipping into ERIC and other data bases, like *Psychological Abstracts*, as well.

In a school district that places a high priority on keeping its staff well informed of education developments, every school has a microfiche reader in its media center. With about 6,000 professional employees in the county's public schools,



ERIC search facilities are within reach of every educator in the nation

Dowling estimates that there are 2,000 searches a year, both manual and computerized, of ERIC and other data bases.

But Montgomery County wants to encourage even wider use of its search services. In a current experiment, a portable computer terminal is brought into a high school media center. During the week the terminal remains there, a media specialist works with teachers and students, getting information for them from ERIC and other data bases. Students' queries are often directed to the *New York Times* computer service. The youngsters, it might be noted, take to computer searches faster than do some adults.

Julie Lando is in charge of the professional library for the Alexandria City Public Schools on the Virginia side of the Potomac outside Washington, D.C. As assistant to Dale W. Brown, curriculum specialist in libraries and media, she does manual ERIC searches for high officials in the school district, teachers do their own manual searches after a one-on-one session with Lando or after learning how in one of her workshops.

Though she has no computer facilities, Lando does have a microfiche collection. Faculty members can borrow one of her six portable microfiche readers, weighing only two or three pounds, and take it home for a few days to read documents at their leisure. (Some libraries are equipped to make duplicate microfiches for under 25¢ each so people can build up their own microfiche libraries.)

Even without computer facilities (although she feels some day the budget will have to find funds for a computer) Lando believes ERIC is a "fantastic" system for finding valuable information. "Most users," she says, "find far more than they believe is available" on subjects as varied as adolescent suicide, time on task, mastery learning, effects of diet on hyperactive children, religion in the schools, therapeutic physical education,

early retirement, and peer influence on children's learning.

If you have read this far, you now join thousands of educators who know what ERIC is and what it can do for them. Somewhere within reach of every educator in America is a counterpart of Marian, eager to introduce ERIC to anyone who can be helped by the system. That includes possibly every educator in the country. ★

• MORE ON ERIC

All of the following publications are available free, while supplies last from ERIC Processing and Reference Facility, 4833 Rugby Ave., Suite 303, Bethesda, MD 20014 tel. 301/656-9723

Bibliography of Publications About ERIC Lists more than 300 items relating to the ERIC system

Directory of ERIC Microfiche Collections 62 pp. Lists addresses, phone numbers, types of equipment, and services of 742 facilities by state and city; includes locations outside U.S.

Directory of ERIC Search Services 61 pp. Lists organizations providing computer searches of ERIC's data base, arranged by state and city; includes search methods and costs.

ERIC Information Analysis Products, 1979 58 pp

ERIC Information Analysis Products, 1978 74 pp

ERIC Information Analysis Products, 1975-77 162 pp

The three publications above, annotated bibliographies of items and publications produced by the ERIC Clearinghouses, include abstracts of conference papers, research reports, and subject bibliographies, with information on availability. Indexed by subject, author, and institution.

How to Start an ERIC Collection 20 pp. Describes all ERIC system tools, including directories, indexes, microfiche collections, costs, ordering information.

How to Use ERIC 19 pp. Briefly describes system, lists all ERIC Clearinghouses with functions, gives steps for manual and computer searches.

Pocket Guide to ERIC. Pocket-size brochure summarizes ERIC services and where to find specific information.