



School Library Processing Centers

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF centralized cataloging for school libraries is a relatively new development, although at least one school system centralized its cataloging as early as 1917.¹ Though school systems with many schools might logically have been expected to seize upon this effective service as a valuable aid in establishing school libraries, the fact is that few of them did. There are many elements which make centralized cataloging a more logical development for school libraries than for most other types of libraries, while certain of their weaknesses, such as chronic understaffing, make centralized technical processing highly desirable.

Bernice Wiese and Catherine Whitehorn identified ten problems related to individual school cataloging which influenced Baltimore City's decision to centralize cataloging and processing.² These included: (1) delays in preparing books for use so that they were accessible to teachers and students, (2) the need to provide clerical service for cataloging in the most economical way, (3) the difficulty of providing effective catalogs for schools which had no librarian, (4) the need for simpler classification in elementary schools, (5) the requirement of the school curriculum for special school-oriented subject cataloging not available on commercially printed cards, (6) the need for continuity, uniformity, and consistency in cataloging, (7) the problem of keeping cataloging up to date, (8) the long delay in preparing new school collections for use, (9) the large number of school librarians with little or no cataloging experience, and (10) the desirability that all schools served have catalogs of a uniformly high quality. Gladys Lively identified several additional reasons to justify centralized cataloging and processing.³ She listed such advantages as saving money, having more of the routine work actually performed by clerks, eliminating wasteful duplication of work, and

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freeing librarians for professional service to students and teachers. Mary Egan felt that the provision of centralized processing was an asset in recruiting librarians for school library positions.⁴ An unexpected fringe benefit may be an enhanced respect and status for school librarians because of the increased guidance and planning they are able to provide, partially as a result of centralized processing.⁵ Most writers agree that a most important justification for centralized processing is that librarians are permitted thereby to concentrate greater effort on direct services to the school's instructional program.

Each of the reasons given appears to have considerable validity. So many school libraries have been and still are staffed with only one librarian, or a part-time librarian unsupported by a clerical staff, that they can expect a well cataloged collection only through centralized cataloging or else at the expense of almost all services to the students and teachers. In some school systems, where school libraries are staffed with volunteers, central processing offers truly the only opportunity for organizing the collection effectively. Aceto, in a study of central processing in New York State, found insufficient staff the most frequently reported reason school systems initiated centralized processing.⁶

Though most comments on staff emphasize the absence of librarians or their inexperience, and lack of clerical assistance, another sound reason for centralized cataloging is the deficient library education of many persons assigned to school librarian positions. Low state certification requirements and the chronic shortage of school librarians force schools to employ as librarians teachers who have only a few, if any, courses in library education. Central processing enables such personnel to provide elements of school library service which they could not were they required to organize the collection.

Still another justification for centralized cataloging for school libraries relates to staff. While in larger libraries each librarian is assigned a specialized task—as a cataloger, a reference librarian—in most school libraries the librarians must fill all the professional library positions, an assignment that forces the librarian to perform all tasks, whether or not they fit his skills and personality. Centralized cataloging and processing limits, at least in one area, those library skills in which he must be a specialist.

Yet another reason for central cataloging for school libraries is the large amount of duplication in collections from school to school.

While school librarians do select materials to fit local school needs and a unique student body, they also select to support a common curriculum taught in all the schools of a system. This duplication of collections increases the possibility of economical central processing for schools.

Many school systems have found it difficult to initiate central processing, especially in systems with well-established school libraries. School librarians fear loss of authority, or wish to classify books differently and provide varying subject headings. Milbrey Jones believes the standardization of subject headings to be "one of the more valid reasons for establishing centralized processing,"⁷ an opinion with which many would concur. Though few writers report it, the opposition of school librarians has often hampered the early operation of centralized cataloging and processing services.

Along with the advantages, Wiese and Whitehorn listed four possible disadvantages in centralized cataloging: (1) that librarians might fail to examine new books, (2) that some librarians might desire different numbers and headings, (3) that some librarians claim central processing might take more time, and (4) that card catalogs might be less useful because cross references were not included promptly.⁸ However, in a speech to the Bucks County School Librarians Association, Doylestown, Pennsylvania, in November 1965, Miss Wiese reported that she now sees no disadvantages. Darling has reported that the Processing Center of the Montgomery County Public Schools, Rockville, Maryland, prints and distributes subject cross reference cards.⁹

One of the problems of centralized cataloging which appears to present an obstacle to many school librarians is book selection. Indeed many processing centers have assumed rigidity in selection by using fixed order dates and required lists. However, even those school systems which use buying lists in connection with their centralized ordering usually provide a method to accommodate special needs. Madison, Wisconsin, for example, in addition to preparing buying lists based on reviews submitted by all school librarians, permits "fringe" orders for individual libraries.¹⁰

Many processing centers which once limited order dates, in order to assure a steady work flow and a favorable ratio of volumes to titles in the early stages of central technical services, have later been able to modify their schedules for greater flexibility. Montgomery County, Maryland, began in 1961 with four order lists and order

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dates per year, but in 1964 abolished both lists and dates, so that librarians could order at any time.¹¹ Use of direct copy equipment has made it almost as economical to process one or a few copies of a title as to do large numbers, especially if the title has been cataloged previously.

Basically, limitations on selection of materials are not directly related to the availability of central cataloging. Larger school systems tend to have an organized program for the review and evaluation of materials, and to limit selection to approved lists whether or not they have centralized processing. Where ordering, cataloging, and processing are centralized, approved lists may facilitate orderly procedures, but are not usually planned for that purpose.

In school libraries, which are increasingly administered as comprehensive instructional materials centers, non-print materials present special problems in organization and cataloging. Librarians who are reasonably skillful in cataloging books find non-book materials more demanding. Though most school systems reportedly have central cataloging only of books, Greensboro, North Carolina,¹² and Montgomery County, Maryland,¹³ catalog both books and non-print materials. Fulton County Public Schools, in Georgia, catalogs only non-print materials, relying on the Georgia State Catalog Card Service for most of the cataloging for books.¹⁴ Enough other school systems are studying the methods of those processing centers which process non-print materials to indicate a rising interest and the beginning of a trend to process all types of materials. The Montgomery County Public Schools Processing Center, for example, receives several visitors each month from school systems planning to initiate or expand processing services.

Another problem frequently discussed is the special relationship of the school library collection to the school curriculum, a relationship which school librarians say generates a need for special subject headings. The available evidence indicates that most central processing centers actually use headings from Sears, often accepting those printed on Wilson cards. Madison uses Sears' *List of Subject Headings* except when additional headings are needed.¹⁵ Jones, in a literature survey of school library technical services, questioned the necessity of major adjustments in either classification or subject headings for school libraries.⁷

Most of the information available concerning centralized cataloging and processing centers serving school libraries comes from articles

describing individual school system processing centers. Only a limited number of studies have attempted to explore school system central processing on a larger scale.

Whitehorn and Wiese, in April, 1956, conducted a survey of processing centers in school systems which they thought likely to have central processing.¹⁶ Of 52 questionnaires mailed, they received 36 replies, 23 from school systems with central cataloging. Of the 23 systems, 20 had complete processing of books, but only 14 had central ordering. The number of schools served by the respective centers ranged from 3 to 120. Nine of the centers began by cataloging books for elementary schools only, 5 for secondary schools only, and 7 for all schools in the system. They reported staffs that ranged from no professionals to 4, and from one-fourth of a clerk to four and one-half clerks. All of the centers used the Dewey Decimal System. A study of school libraries in the Pacific Northwest reported 28 school systems in that region with centralized technical services in 1960.¹⁷

The most extensive body of data on the number of school systems with centralized cataloging and processing services was issued as a part of the 1960-61 school library statistics from the U.S. Office of Education.¹⁸ It was reported that 467 school systems provided central processing of library materials for elementary schools and 239 for secondary schools. This represented 3 percent of the nation's school systems for elementary, and 2 percent for secondary. The largest percentage of systems with central processing was to be found in the category with 25,000 or more students. The largest block in actual numbers, however, was in the group enrolling 3,000 to 11,999 students. An insignificant percentage of smaller systems had central processing. The study indicated the Far West as the region with the largest number of school systems with centralized processing, followed by the Great Lakes region. The nation's school system processing centers were served by 370 librarians and 707 clerical positions. The study provided information also on the types of materials processed and on the salaries of librarians serving processing centers.

In Aceto's study of processing centers in school districts of New York State, based on twenty replies from the twenty-four school systems known to have centralized processing, he discovered that 75 percent of the centers had existed ten years or less. The centers served from two to seventeen schools, all small school systems with budgets for 1960-61 ranging from \$1,700 to \$62,300. His report was highly critical of their procedures, noting that the centers followed

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outmoded practices, such as accessioning, that they failed to promote the instructional materials concept, and that they served school systems probably too small for economical service.¹⁹

The appearance of Aceto's article in *Library Journal* brought three replies, two from librarians directing processing centers for Boards of Cooperative Educational Services in New York State, centers omitted from his study. Mary Ann Connor pointed out that the Monroe County Center processed books and non-book materials for forty libraries, representing a combined enrollment of 30,979.²⁰ The previous year they had processed 32,285 books and additional non-book materials. Further, she protested that her center had eliminated the outmoded records of which Aceto complained, and had introduced a high degree of mechanization. At the same time, she gave support to Aceto's basic criticisms and stated that 10,000 books per year was the minimum load necessary to make a center feasible and 20,000 books per year to make it economical. (Other authors have estimated the required figure even higher.)²¹

Jean H. Porter provided little new evidence in her reply to Aceto's article, but reported that the Niagara-Orleans Center was mechanized. This center, however, was actually smaller than some of the single school district processing centers included in Aceto's survey since it processed only "6000 books . . . for eight libraries in three school districts with a pupil population of 5910."²²

There can be little quarrel with the bulk of Aceto's criticism. Most of the centers, if not all, appear to be too small to provide effective and reasonably economical central processing with staff, equipment, and facilities adequate for the job. An unfortunate recommendation in the American Association of School Librarians' 1960 *Standards for School Library Programs* may have encouraged many school systems to initiate centralized processing unwisely. The standards, in a footnote, suggested that "when school systems have three or more schools, centralized processing should be introduced."²³ The school library standards of six states, including New York, recommend centralized processing.²⁴ However, only Minnesota, which recommends centralized processing for school systems with two or more schools serving the same grade levels, uses the number of schools as a basis for determining when this service should be initiated. Florida, in school library standards most recently prepared, recommends centralized processing at the county or regional level.

Regional school library processing centers appear to represent a

new trend in many areas. The University of Wisconsin's workshop, *Planning Technical Services for School Libraries*, in 1965, was devoted to encouraging the development of cooperative processing centers in the new Co-operative Educational Service Agencies emerging in that state.²⁵ Similar services have been recommended in Michigan's new Intermediate Districts. As reported above, some of New York's Boards of Cooperative Educational Services provide centralized processing for several independent school districts. Buck's County Board of Education, Doylestown, Pennsylvania, has recently received a large grant under Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, to develop central educational services for all the school districts in the county. These services will include centralized cataloging and processing. It is probable that the revised *Standards for School Library Programs*, scheduled for publication in 1968, will recommend that initiation of centralized cataloging be based on the number of volumes to be handled, and that smaller school systems band together to develop regional co-operative processing centers. Independent centers in small school systems can be neither economical nor effective.

Another trend in school system central cataloging is the use of data processing equipment and computers. Two systems, Port Huron, Michigan,²⁶ and Albuquerque, New Mexico,²⁷ have issued reports on their use of data processing for cataloging. Both reports emphasize the actual procedures followed. Mary Ann Swanson has described the use of data processing in technical services at Evanston Township High School in Illinois.²⁸ Other school systems exhibit a mounting interest in using computer techniques for centralized cataloging.

Most school systems, large and small, which have developed centralized cataloging appear pleased with what they have. Only one school system reports partially abandoning its cataloging service. Los Angeles City Schools district, which began centralized cataloging in 1927, has partially shifted to commercialized cataloging and processing, largely because it was no longer possible to keep up with the volume of work.²⁹ Since other school systems have absorbed equally large rates of growth, Mildred Frary's explanation of Los Angeles' decision to turn to a commercial firm fails to explain why a school system, which need not return a profit, cannot catalog as economically and efficiently as a commercial firm.

Far more needs to be known about centralized cataloging and processing for school libraries. Other centers ought to prepare the

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same kind of careful self-analysis and cost analysis as that prepared for Baltimore City.³⁰ The Office of Education should gather regular, recurring statistics on processing centers of school systems and intermediate educational service agencies, using the categories proposed in the American Library Association's *Library Statistics: A Handbook of Concepts, Definitions and Terminology*.³¹ In addition, a comprehensive and detailed study of practices and procedures in processing centers is in order. Perhaps the most needed publication is a manual and guide on centralized cataloging and processing for school libraries which will outline desirable procedures and provide guidelines which will help school systems determine whether they should establish such a service.

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