

The Human Side of Curriculum Development

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Mental agility is a prerequisite for adjusting to change of any kind. That this is particularly true in the field of education is pointed out by Vernon E. Anderson, professor of education and director of the curriculum center at the University of Connecticut. Mr. Anderson suggests that if teachers and textbooks are to be changed the supervisor must not only recognize the need for this change, but must also stand ready to aid in cultivating this growth so necessary to keep pace with the inconstancy of today's world.

WHEN SUPERINTENDENT
Dugby went "all-out" for curriculum development, he appointed committees and issued directives. He drew up a plan which involved production committees, editing committees, philosophy committees, coordinating committees, vertical committees, and horizontal committees. "Put everyone to work; that's my motto," he commented as he viewed the plan on paper with satisfaction. But to his surprise the plan didn't work. Everyone grumbled and quarreled in trying to make the deadline when the new courses of study with a "new point of view" had to be produced. Some teachers called others "progressive," who were "full of impractical theories from the teachers colleges;" the others, in turn, labeled the first group as a "bunch of old fogies."

Superintendent Good might have been puzzled as to what a vertical committee looked like, but he knew people. He reasoned that after all, the teacher is the one who determines what the curriculum is going to be for her children. "I can either handicap her or help her in giving the best possible

kinds of experiences to her pupils," he mused. And he went to work to set up a situation in which those concerned might plan together, study together, and think together. He wanted a good school but he knew that he must help bring about a change in the teacher if he wanted to change what was going on in the classroom. There were no spectacular overall modifications in a year's time, but to his satisfaction he saw one teacher trying new things for the first time in ten years; another discarding the use of workbooks; a third planning a project with her students.

A Change in People

For curriculum change involves a change in people, in the point of view of those people. The terms "curriculum development" and "curriculum improvement" imply change, but surface alterations do not result in any real improvement. The people involved in the program, their nature, interests, and characteristics become the focal point of attention. Curriculum bulletins, committee work, in-service classes, and

professional books are only the instruments through which these changes are brought about.

Human relationships are particularly evident in a curriculum development program. The teacher plans day-by-day experiences with the pupils in her classroom; teachers study common problems in groups; principals and supervisors work with teachers; parents and teachers study children together; outside consultants plan with the local staff. There are classes, meetings, conferences, workshops—in all of which face-to-face contacts are important.

Shattering Group Barriers

In any such cooperative planning and study are persons who differ widely in background, education, and ways of thinking. Often there are groups who are just as far apart as economic and social classes of urban society, or as "minority" and "majority" groups. Age, type of responsibility, salary, and social prestige are factors that help to separate the groups involved in curriculum making. Principals and teachers may, for example, in some schools have little or no interests in common, either socially or as far as planning the instructional program is concerned. Each may have a separate professional organization, a separate social existence, and there may be a very little sharing of experiences that break down barriers.

Good intergroup relations come about through the building of bridges to understanding and appreciation rather than the erection of barriers. To bring about harmonious relationships where suspicion, misunderstanding, and mistrust have existed, situations must be created in which certain

conditions can prevail. In the school, the responsibility for them rests with the principal, the superintendent, or whoever is the instructional leader of the group. They include:

An opportunity to know individuals as persons. To those who know Ruth, Susan, or Carl, all high school teachers are not aloof, snobbish, and subject-matter minded.

A respect for personalities and the recognition that each has a contribution to make. Every teacher—traditional or modern, recently trained or an "emergency" teacher—has something which she does well and opinions that should be considered.

An open-mindedness toward new ideas and a willingness to listen to the opinions of others. No peace was ever won when two nations came together around the peace table determined not to "give an inch"; nor was progress ever made toward a better school curriculum when minds were closed with dogged determination not to be convinced.

A control of the situation by all concerned, where everyone has a part in making as well as carrying out decisions.

A freedom to express beliefs without fear of caustic criticism, disapproval, or "rating" by those who do not hold the same point of view. Recently trained teachers coming into a school where everyone frowns on modern ideas know what lack of such freedom does to the spirit.

A desire to get at the facts and accurate information rather than to follow hearsay, tradition, and superstition. The scientific method of attacking a problem and weighing the evidence is just as valuable for group study as for solving individual problems.

A spirit of cooperation in planning, in leadership, in executing, pointed toward achievement of the mutual aim—a better education for children.

A real leadership which sees that these conditions are made possible, that en-

courages people to respect others for what they are, that creates a situation of goodwill and understanding rather than one of fear and insecurity.

Such are the conditions which can crumble walls that too often exist between the high school teacher and the elementary teacher; the vocational teacher and the teacher of academic subjects; the new teacher and the old teacher; the administrator and the teachers; the teachers and the pupils. If the teacher who organizes her instruction in experience units will but stop to examine the reasons for the point of view of the one who uses the subject curriculum and to get acquainted with her, she will probably find common points of interest in children and—most important of all—a starting point for the mutual professional growth of both.

Looking Through the Teacher's Eyes

Let us picture what these human relationships mean to a teacher when someone who is an "outsider" in ways of thinking, social contacts, and in general interests and experience attempts to bring about curriculum improvements.

In the first illustration given at the beginning of the article, the superintendent (or principal) was, let us say, sold on the idea that modern educational theories were good, that his staff must change. There is a teacher in the building (probably one of several) who has always taught with the use of a single textbook, has tested for information and facts learned, and has held up certain standards in knowledge and skills that she has attempted to have every pupil reach. She begins

to hear about "core curriculum," "experience units," "maturity levels"—words that mean absolutely nothing to her in terms of experience. They may be definitions in her mind, for some one has attempted to explain to her what they mean. But they have unpleasant connotations, since the new principal has said that it is the way teachers should teach if they are to be considered as successful in his building.

Where she had previously been regarded as a successful teacher because most of her students passed the survey achievement tests given each year, now she does not fit into the principal's standards for success. She does not want to change her ways of teaching, for there is for her a security in following the text and testing for information. She knows how to do it. She does not know how to teach by experience units; in fact, she says that she doesn't "know the first thing about them." She is afraid to try because she is sure that she will fail. As the pressure grows for the teachers to alter their methods, so does her feeling of insecurity. No one has succeeded in changing her ideas; rather, she has become more set against "newfangled methods" because she does not understand them. In her present emotional state, it would be very difficult to help her understand.

It is easier to do things as one has done them for years. Change involves additional effort, struggles within oneself as old ideas are uprooted. Nor does such a change take place rapidly. In the process there is bound to be insecurity and fear of the unknown until a teacher can prove to herself and others that she can follow the new approach successfully.

Regard for the Person Is Essential

Real leadership "makes haste slowly." The differences that exist among teachers are considered an advantage. Each one's ideas are heard and all have a chance to study together what is the best procedure. Superintendent Good did not press anyone. He did not publicly announce that he had set about to make changes. But he did make it possible for his teachers to express opinions freely; he challenged the group to study, and as they were challenged, they found time to study and discuss.

He saw to it that any progress received recognition; found ways of having the teachers help each other. One teacher whose room had always looked as barren as an eighteenth-century schoolroom began to use bulletin board materials. She had her pupils help decorate the room with curtains, light-colored paint, and some sketches of their own design. With her permission, the superintendent, arranged for one of the meetings of the staff in this teacher's room, where she led an informal discussion on how the pupils had helped her make the room a more pleasant place in which to work and live. In this school each teacher felt she had something valuable to give to the rest of the group.

The Outsider Who Is One of Us

A practice that is becoming more prevalent in curriculum improvement is that of inviting an outside consultant to work with the local staff. Among institutions giving these services many are realizing that the most effective kind of

situation for in-service education is that in which there is a central purpose related to the teaching job, where a group can work together on common problems. If the consultant comes with the fanfare of an "expert" to talk to a faculty meeting, it is extremely doubtful that his visit will pay dividends.

Usually, he will find that the warming-up process is slow, that he is not accepted by the group as one of them until he has had an opportunity to work with them. There is an uncomfortable gulf between him and the teachers. He is an outsider, a stranger—someone from another "level" in the educational hierarchy. Should he be someone who likes to play up that distinction to satisfy his own ego, the teachers of the local staff may well heave a sigh of relief when he has gone, with a few side remarks concerning "impractical theorists."

The consultants who succeed in stimulating curriculum improvement are those who work with teachers on a give-and-take informal basis, getting ideas from the teachers, seeing opportunities where local people are given a chance to lead and to suggest means for improvement, offering helpful suggestions, and provoking thought.

Teachers, as children, grow in attitudes, understandings, and appreciation when they are in friendly, sympathetic, and challenging surroundings. Only in an atmosphere of trust, confidence, security, and mutual respect can a curriculum improvement program really function.

FOR A DISCUSSION of a vital educational problem, read *The Listening Post*

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