

Actually, many of the same principles apply to the learning and skill practice of supervisors and curriculum directors that apply to their own work in the educating of teachers. For example, the conferences of supervisors and curriculum directors might very well be devoted to the location and practice and discussion of skill problems in working with teachers and principals. Wouldn't that bring into operation the principle of group reinforcement within this group that we have talked about as so

important in the development of stable changes within a group of teachers?

I suspect, also, that one of the very important ways in which curriculum directors and supervisors can improve their skills in this area is to become partners in action-research enterprises, because there is probably no way that's better to learn how teachers may be helped to use their own group processes as a laboratory for improving their own skills in human relationships than to participate in such action-research.

## *Let's Work Together on the Curriculum*

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ALICE MIEL

Any realistic examination of the factors necessary for curriculum improvement must take into consideration the nature of the climate in which a group works. In this description and analysis of why one effort toward curriculum improvement failed, Alice Miel, assistant professor of education, Teachers College, Columbia University, points to many of the very practical and concrete aspects of group interaction which materially affect the results of curriculum experimentation.

NOT LONG AGO a school principal came to a college office with a request, "My teachers want to improve the curriculum. Will you serve as a consultant to them? You may have the whole hour at my November teachers' meeting. I will take care of my announcements some other way. I should inform you, however, that my teachers have many home obligations after school. It is a real hardship for them to stay after three o'clock. It would be most unwise

to prolong the meeting beyond four."

Thus began a short association that ended in failure; but many were the lessons it held for the process of curriculum improvement. Let us continue the story, analyzing as we go along the apparent successes and failures, the assumptions on which people were operating, and other possible explanations of the chain of events. First, however, we need more background for analyzing the facts presented so far.

## Principal and Consultant Do Some Pre-Planning

The consultant accepted the invitation with some misgivings because of certain assumptions she held. First, *she looked upon the curriculum as everything that happens to young people in connection with their school life.* Second, *she was convinced that the curriculum of a school will not be improved unless there is improvement in the aspirations, insights, and skills of the adults responsible for the pupils in the school.* She believed that pupils will not get a better break in their school program unless changes are brought about in the thinking and behaving of teachers and administrators, parents, and other laymen. She was sure that producing such changes was a job requiring much time and the dedicated efforts of each individual concerned. She had much evidence that the value of the individual's efforts to change and grow is heightened immeasurably when a number of individuals work as a group. The consultant doubted that her assumptions were shared by Miss Mullen, the principal. Her doubts were based on what Miss Mullen said in issuing the invitation, and on the arrangements she was willing and unwilling to make for teachers to work with the consultant.

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*Wording of the Invitation.* Miss Mullen's invitation seemed to imply that curriculum improvement is a process that can be tossed off casually by devoting one hour a month to it. Her use of the expression "my teachers' meeting" might well imply a conception of an occasion for one person to *tell* others what to do.

*Arrangements Made.* When the consultant suggested the desirability of getting to know teachers through a series of informal chats and classroom visits before going into a formal planning session with the entire group, Miss Mullen had a ready answer. "It would make the teachers very insecure to be visited in their classrooms. They are busy all day long and have no time to talk to anyone. At lunch time they are supervising children. We all leave at three o'clock every day."

Miss Mullen had other proposals for preparation for the first meeting with the consultant: 1) She would take the consultant on a one-hour guided tour through the building. This would give them two minutes in each classroom; 2) she would take some time in the October teachers' meeting to prepare the group for the consultant's coming in November.

*Perhaps the consultant made a mistake in not arriving at a clear initial understanding with the principal as to what progress in curriculum improvement was anticipated and what would be involved in achieving that amount of progress. Perhaps the consultant was overly optimistic in hoping that as teachers, principal, and consultant worked along together, all might grow and that the need for more time for group work might become apparent.*

At any rate, the principal's wishes were respected and the preliminary steps were taken. The second part of our story takes place at the November teachers' meeting.

## Work with Teachers Begins

On the appointed day the consultant was on hand to help a group of com-

plete strangers get started on their venture in cooperative curriculum improvement. The principal seated herself with the consultant at the front of the school auditorium facing two rows of teachers. Expressions on their faces were mostly ones of watchful waiting.

Miss Mullen opened the meeting by addressing the consultant: "The teachers know the background of all this. They will present various problems they have."

The sixth grade teacher, obviously a spokesman for the group, was the first to respond. She asked the sensible and revealing question, "What is the purpose of the discussion of these problems?"

Satisfied by the consultant's answer that "we want to find some problems on which we can work cooperatively," the group opened up. Statements of problems were well formulated and they came rapidly.

Little disagreement among the teachers was apparent. They pointed out the many pressures under which they operated. They showed that the individual teacher is the final recipient of all demands and expectations of a whole group of central office staff members concerned variously with curriculum, guidance, research, and testing. They mentioned the expectation of their "superiors" and of the parents that children rate high on standardized tests since their I.Q.'s were high. They cited demands from art and music supervisors that teachers teach art and music unrelated to the social studies "unit," while the course of study in social studies gave just the opposite direction. The teachers admitted that part of the pressure came from themselves. They believed

in a modern program and wanted so many good things for the children that they could not get them all into a crowded program.

Before the meeting closed, the consultant summarized the high points of the discussion and suggested that it would be helpful if a small group would organize the material the teachers had prepared for the discussion. A sub-committee volunteered to collect all the problems written by teachers and to make some kind of order out of them.

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The part of the story just related reveals quite a bit about the teachers who were undertaking cooperative work. *In general they seemed to be concerned about best ways of meeting their many responsibilities. They had located definite barriers that were preventing them from doing a good job as they conceived it. They seemed ready for help in working on these trouble spots. They were willing to take the next step in getting to work on their problems.*

The question the spokesman raised with regard to the purpose of the problem "census" leads one to wonder *just how the principal had prepared the teachers for this meeting.* The odds are that they were told they were to have a consultant and were asked to cooperate. Teachers are nice people; they usually are willing to do almost anything to help out. But most likely these teachers had done their homework on faith, without feeling sure that anything would come of it.

We are led to wonder also *if the teachers may not have had a rather close but unofficial organization for*

*sticking together and presenting a united front.* Not one, but several spoke to each point raised. It was fairly apparent from the tone of the meeting that the teachers knew well the protection the group can give to the individual. Perhaps they had found ways of which Miss Mullen was unaware for working out solutions to some of their problems of relationship with their principal. The pity of it was that this group solidarity was not being promoted and utilized in cooperative work that included the principal.

Without regard to the fact that teachers might have been ordered to do some homework for which they saw little purpose, *Miss Mullen's idea of having each teacher come prepared for the discussion was a good one.* It meant that the meeting time was more efficiently used. However, different ways of arranging for such preparation might be tried. For example, problems might have been fed in from informal chats based on classroom situations observed by teacher, consultant, and principal together.

#### Follow-Up Meets with Delays

Directly after the November meeting, the teacher sub-committee met and did its work. A well-organized list of problems with related sub-problems was issued in mimeographed form to each teacher.

The consultant conferred with the principal about a meeting time when the group could plan next steps. Miss Mullen was not very encouraging. She could not give up another teachers' meeting for some months. She was sure the teachers would be unwilling to stay after school a second time during the

month. Would she ask them whether they would be willing to stay, or would she offer such an opportunity to volunteers? No, she would rather not. Could time be found during the school day when the consultant might meet with small groups? That would be pretty difficult, the principal believed, but she would see. It was March before Miss Mullen "saw."

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It is obvious that *there can be no progress on curriculum improvement unless time is given to it.* It is just as obvious that no group can give attention to solving curriculum problems unless there is *provision for meetings of the group.* Furthermore, *progress is bound to be slow on work that often requires fundamental shifts in point of view, the building of new habits and skills, and the securing of new arrangements,* such as schedules, requirements, and methods of evaluation. If even one month, to say nothing of two or three, must intervene between each step of this gradual process, progress is so snail-like as to be frustrating. Spans of attention and interest have certain limits in even the most zealous, and much time is wasted in getting up steam over again. To say the least, Miss Mullen's course did not seem calculated to facilitate curriculum change.

*If a group undertakes an enterprise, the group, not one individual of power, should determine its working schedule.* Miss Mullen said teachers would not give extra time to their curriculum project. As far as we know, they were not given the opportunity to indicate their choice. It is certain that there were individuals among them who would have volunteered for extra duty.

### Teachers and Consultant Meet Again

Arrangements were made for the consultant early in March to have one hour of school time with each of four small groups of teachers. The teachers did their part to make the meeting possible by handling double groups of children during the last hour of the school day.

At last the second step in problem-solving could be taken. After three months' delay, step one—taking a problem census and organizing the results—could be followed by step two—selecting problems of high priority and planning how to begin work on them. The teachers proceeded to this task with surprising enthusiasm, considering how long it had been since they began their work on the project. Each small group agreed on a few key problems to be attacked first, and planned first steps in the attack.

Since Miss Mullen could find no time in the immediate future when the large group could discuss and plan on the basis of thinking in the small groups, the consultant prepared a report to principal and teachers, summarizing agreements reached by each sub-group. The report was organized in parallel columns to give a detailed statement of each problem selected and to show the action contemplated in solving it. Teachers were asked to follow any of the requests of small groups with which they were willing to comply.

One suggestion was that each teacher keep a record of all interruptions for three different days in order to study how much of the pressure felt by teachers was avoidable. These records were to be anonymous and sent directly

to the consultant for tabulating. The teachers responded with alacrity to this opportunity to get definite facts which might help in solving one of their problems.

Results proved to be quite interesting. A large percentage of the interruptions could be classified as administrative. A tactfully worded report was sent to the principal only. The report gave highlights of the data and raised certain questions. The suggestion was made that the whole matter be made the subject of discussion with teachers and that steps be planned for improving the situation. In this way, the teachers might feel some small measure of success and be encouraged to take further steps in improving the curriculum.

Although it was still early April, the principal informed the consultant that it was too late to do anything with the report before the close of the school year (late in June). When fall came, Miss Mullen "regretted to inform" the consultant that her teachers felt they would be too busy to do curriculum work that year. And so the story ends when the teachers had taken only the third step in problem-solving—gathering of data to be used in the solution of the selected problem.

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We do not know whether the teachers really were too busy or whether Miss Mullen wanted an excuse to stop something she did not like. *Perhaps she had the mistaken notion that curriculum improvement meant teachers must change but principals did not need to!* The study in her school was getting uncomfortably close to challenging some of her procedures. That was not what she had anticipated.

Even if the teachers said they were too busy, we do not know to what extent their answer was influenced by a feeling that they were not getting anywhere. *Delay is a great enemy of progress, a great dampener of spirits.*

Many steps taken in this project were promising, even though the decision that the teachers would undertake this study may have been the arbitrary decision of one person. In each of the two meetings held with the teachers *there was an attempt to make the study theirs, to show that the problems to be worked on were to be ones they felt were most pressing in terms of their everyday work with children.* As rapidly as possible, in the face of delays, *there was movement from large, more or less vaguely outlined problems to specific points where people could take hold and do something about a troubling situation.* The problem of interruptions, for example, was real to the teachers and should have been comparatively easy to solve.

*Records were used and shared with each member of the group* (except the last report on the study of interruptions). These records made problems and plans definite. *Sub-groups and individual assignments were used for greater efficiency in getting certain kinds of work done for the larger group.* From all the evidence available, none of the failure of the project could be laid to lack of cooperation on the part of the teachers.

It is barely possible that the teachers had to be coaxed or coerced by the principal at every step and that Miss Mullen finally wearied of the task. We have no way of knowing either whether open teacher resistance might

not have been met at some point along the way as the study drew closer to the operations of teachers themselves. *It is normal to resist change that involves building new skills and new sources of security.*

Mistakes were made also. If the consultant had been wiser and could have been more foreseeing, she might not have run the risk of encountering fatal resistance from Miss Mullen. *To lose the cooperation of the leader who has power, before the group has built up adequate power and strategy of its own, is to lose the whole battle.* On the other hand, the mistake might have been not making sure that the report on the study of interruptions and the proposal of a meeting to plan follow-up on the study was given to each group member. For all the consultant knows, the teachers may still be wondering why nothing was done with all those schedules they sent in. *No group can protect itself from unfair use of power unless it can be kept fully informed.*

Other hampering factors in this situation have been pointed out and need not be repeated here.

### **We Earmark Some Essential Elements**

Another example of group work on the curriculum might have given a better opportunity to discuss such problems as individual and group follow-through after problems have been selected and initial work has begun, securing the participation of laymen, and evaluating efforts and results.<sup>1</sup> This de-

<sup>1</sup> A number of examples of various kinds of programs for curriculum improvement will be described and analyzed in a forthcoming publication of the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation on ways of working in curriculum development. The story told in this article is taken from the files on that study.

tailed description and analysis of one rather negative illustration can be justified only if it has pointed up some essential elements in a satisfactory process of curriculum improvement. Through this device the writer has attempted to show the importance of the following factors:

**An honest beginning.** People have a right to go into a venture voluntarily and with their eyes open.

**Freedom.** People must have assurance that they will be able to carry out plans that have been thoughtfully worked out and can be justified.

**Time.** People must have group work time in blocks of sufficient length, and of sufficient frequency. Meetings should be scheduled when people can work efficiently in order that encouraging progress may be made.

**Organization.** People must have organized opportunities for working together on their problems.

**Leadership.** Leadership must be of the kind that genuinely wants to and knows how to facilitate the work of the group. Leaders should expect to change and grow along with other group members.

**Skill in problem attack.** Someone in the group must be skilled in the steps of group problem solving and must give leadership in this area. All group members must improve their skill in this direction.

**Records.** Written communication is important for clinching ideas and

plans and giving a basis for evaluation of efforts.

**Group morale.** No one can work wholeheartedly on a project unless he is relatively secure in his job and in his relations with others around him and unless he is receiving satisfaction from the group work. He must be able to trust leaders in particular and feel that the group process is open and above board.

### The Process Isn't Simple

Improving the curriculum is a complicated process requiring thoughtful study by many persons. It is to be hoped that teachers and administrators will come to look upon group work on problems relating to better experiences for girls and boys as part of their regular function. It is to be hoped also that parents and pupils may play a useful part in what should be a cooperative process. If the cooperation of all these persons is as important as many judge it to be, then it would be well to ask, in connection with each group experience with curriculum improvement, some searching questions: *Are people having an experience they will care to repeat? Can they believe that everything possible is being done to facilitate the group's work? Can they feel that they are moving toward significant action for a better school program?*



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