

Curriculum Research

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"How Can I Know?"

"HOW CAN I KNOW?" This question constantly troubles people. Every responsible leader having to make decisions feels the limitations of his knowledge. What kind of environment will work best with these children? What can be done for this non-reader? What kinds of in-service training programs have proved effective?

Knowledge and Experience

Whether he is a teacher, a supervisor, a principal, or a superintendent, he is continually called upon to make decisions whose results are difficult to foresee. He would like these decisions to be founded on the knowledge that grows out of experience. Seldom, if ever, is he able to know with certainty, but through careful study of his own and others' experiences he often can reduce his uncertainty to a minimum.

Any person's own experiences normally are unplanned and rather haphazard. He cannot be sure but what the outcomes of some course of action are due to chance or to important influences that remain unrecognized. Moreover, his personal experience necessarily is limited. If he is to act wisely, he must supplement his own with the experiences of others. He can obtain this vicarious experience in several ways.

Vicarious Experience

He may seek the *counsel of others*; asking teachers, supervisors, or administrators what they have tried, what the outcomes have been. He may inquire of college personnel or others who have made a study of the field. This technique is useful, but as a pathway to certainty is limited by the limitations of the ones consulted.

In *educational history* may be found ideas or solutions that have been evolved and tried. Their outcomes can be judged in perspective and some conclusions reached regarding relative merit and feasibility. Unfortunately, historical data are likely to be so complex that clear-cut judgments are impractical. There are no controls to minimize the influence of these complicating factors. Even so, broad decisions may be justified where those on limited issues are impossible. From a study of Spartan education, for example, one can be assured of the feasibility of building generations of fit subjects for a dictatorship, but history may be useless in determining whether or not to retain Johnny in the fourth grade. Moreover, in our rapidly changing civilization historical answers are likely to be irrelevant. They simply do not fit.

The most helpful type of vicarious experience is *careful research*. One's own research is vicarious to the others who use it. Contemporary research, when carefully planned, executed, and reported, and when appropriate to the issue, forms the most stable foundation for action. But less careful research may also be useful.

ASCD and Research

It was with these ideas in mind that the Research Board of the Association decided to start a department in EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP devoted to research. ASCD has always had a vital concern with knowledge established through experimentation. Supervisors traditionally have used research wherever it could be applied, but in most day-to-day decisions the only guide has been "common sense" or "rule of thumb."

The body of relevant research has been growing rapidly. Workers everywhere are contributing to this reservoir of knowledge. Some is of a precise nature; much of it, dealing with complex and intangible areas, remains nebulous but still offers some help in reaching decisions. Any and all types which meet acceptable standards should assist in strengthening the competence and assurance of leaders.

Some Pitfalls

The major purpose of research is to enable one to predict more accurately, to know what will probably result from a given course of action. A great deal of reported research falls short of meriting a high level of confidence. In some cases experimentation stops one major step too soon. A study of the outcomes of a particular set of experiences for a certain group of children compared to a "control" group leads one to predict that this course of action should be expected to achieve these results with a future group. But, *this hypothesis then remains untested*. No subsequent group is again "processed" to discover the validity of the prediction. Conclusions are based upon what really is the preliminary investigation.

In a valid experiment the underlying assumptions are clearly recognized and stated. The limitations and controls in operation are also apparent. The total research design or methodology is appropriate to the problem and to the physical conditions under which it is operating. To the degree to which these criteria are met, one can have faith in the conclusions.

This department will treat research rather broadly and inclusively. Many studies mentioned will not reach a high standard of confidence. They will be included because they suggest implications for supervisory use. This will especially characterize much so-called "action research," where people are working together to achieve social results. Social change rather than knowledge is the major purpose, but a certain amount of knowledge is also likely to ensue and can be reported.

Looking Ahead

Curriculum and supervision are so inclusive that they are affected by numerous areas of research. Experimentation in psychology, sociology, or the content fields of science, mathematics, etc., as well as in professional education itself, is likely to provide implications. Particular attention will be devoted to research that is directly supervisory in nature such as in-service programs of curriculum development or evaluations of supervisory practice.

A variety of topics is planned. Many significant suggestions are being tried out over the nation. A number of school systems, for example, are experimenting with specialized curriculums for children who deviate strongly from normality in one direction or another. The extremely slow-learning children have always been a problem to our schools as well as to society. Promising results are being produced at a number of centers throughout the country, both with pre-school and with school-age children. Another example of fruitful curriculum experimentation is with children who have low hearing ability.

Another cluster of studies is in the education of emotions. From clinical psychology may come important modifications in school practice. The group dynamics studies in progress may hold even more promise for improving the teaching-learning process.

New attacks on old problems are being investigated. For example, terminal programs adapted to the needs, aspiration levels, and desires of particular groups of students are still being evolved. Some schools are trying various plans of part-time education that will continue to serve their people beyond the day when they are full-time students. Throughout all grades of the school from primary to adult levels, teachers are constantly faced with the inadequacy of some students' study skills. Research in these areas is abundant and suggestive. The above are but a few of the

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but conditioning them to like school, to think of it as a friendly and happy place."

This principal recognized the fact that entrance into school may actually be a traumatic experience for a young child if the change from home to school is too abrupt or if his only previous association with the school has been attendance at a health clinic held in the school, where he may have received an injection with a hypodermic needle, and where there may not have been time for the attending doctor or nurse to get acquainted with the child as a person.

"Further," he noted, "you cannot assume that just because a child doesn't cry in school the first day he attends that he is well adjusted to the new situation." He then went on to describe a plan on which he is working—a plan designed to give very young children pleasurable experiences with the school and to plan cooperatively with parents for activities geared to children's needs. I agreed with him that the greatest benefits come to the child and to the community when the home and school work together, and the earlier this relationship begins the greater are the benefits.

. I know what you're thinking—that this principal is suggesting that the school have meetings of parents of pre-school children and that interesting activities be provided for the children while the parents are participating in child study groups or just getting acquainted with each other. Precisely, that's part of the picture, but I'll wager that you'll never guess how young some people think the child should be

when the school first reaches the home!

The principal is proposing that the school search for ways to get every pregnant woman in the community interested in the school, and to let her understand beyond any doubt that this is a school *for children*. "I consider it an important function of the school," he said, "to share our present-day knowledge of child development with every mother and father just as early as possible. There would be fewer 'rejected children' if parents could be helped before the child even comes into the world to expect to accept him as an individual and, while guiding him toward independence as a person, to learn to enjoy him and to love him steadfastly and consistently."

"But, won't this require an increase in school personnel and perhaps further training for some of your present staff?" I asked.

"Of course," he said, "that's a further investment we must make to assure a good return on our total investment. We need an increase in staff members who are especially trained to work with the parents of young children, people who understand children *and* their parents, and who are capable of learning from parents ways of cementing the relationships of home and school. It is too late to wait until the child is five or six to begin to be concerned. By that time we have already lost the possibility of contact with many homes."

This is all I have time for tonight.

Dorothy

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areas in which research has implications for supervision and curriculum.

One further aim of the Research Board is to help promote in individuals a conception of themselves as persons who are or could be doing research on varying levels of expertness. By seeing what others

are doing, some people may be encouraged to make similar attempts. Readers are invited to describe any informal ideas being tested as well as more formal experimentations. Through all of these channels school people may help one another solve the perennial problem of "keeping up."

Educational Leadership

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