

How Measure a Problem?

RECENTLY THE LITERATURE has been full of pleas for, and accounts of, action research. Maybe the time has come to look to some of the specifics within a program of action research.

The problems are many, but one which confronts an action researcher early is the need to define the problem for attack. The extremes of this problem take two forms: What do you do if the problem is too small? What do you do if the problem is too big?

What If the Problem Is Too Small?

What do we mean by "too small"? Is it possible that "too small" means that the problem is not academically acceptable to administrators or consultants? If we accept a basic concept of action research, that problems stem from the real concerns of researchers, then *no* problem is "too small," if seen as important by those involved.

One school staff started by saying that the major problem of the school was the matter of tardiness of the pupils. The principal and the consultant were not too happy about this definition of problem. Tardiness is not generally accepted as a profound problem by people in educational circles. But this was the problem of the teachers, so that is where the group started.

Examination of the problem of tardiness, the real problem as seen by the teachers, disclosed a number of things. Pupils were more tardy on foggy days than on days which teachers felt to be "real bad weather." A little investigating showed that many homes in the school community, lacking clocks, depended for

the time of day on the clock in the tower of a mid-town department store. On clear days this seemed to work satisfactorily, but on foggy days—no time! Further investigation disclosed other reasons for tardiness, such as:

"Mother had to iron my dress" (she had only one dress).

"I had to feed the baby. He don't know yet how to eat alone and our mother, she went to work."

"Dad started socking us real early so Mom told us to go out so we went to the grocery store and slept some more."

"We tell him (a brother of low intelligence) over and over he's got to hurry to get to school but he just don't seem to know when it's late."

"I had to bring in the water." (54 percent of the families in this area had no running water in their homes).

Answers such as these started teachers to thinking. Maybe there were real reasons for tardiness. Further, there might be a need for reconsidering the curriculum in terms of the needs of boys and girls. The group of teachers gave careful consideration to problems, and before long they were providing shower baths for children in the elementary school, lessons in laundering and mending clothes, and units on how to provide adequate diets on limited budgets.

Problem too small? Maybe there isn't any such thing. The major problem is to provide opportunity for *growing* vision.

What If the Problem Is Too Big?

It may well be of greater concern to the researcher if the initial statement of

the problem is "too big." This is a difficulty because action research requires *action* and, if the problem is too large, possibilities for action may be too long delayed, so that the confidence of the group is lost. Early success in *action* is important to action research.

One group stated as its problem, "Children from broken homes." This presented a life-time research project. After some discussion, the group found some reasons why broken homes presented a problem, and further, why most of the problems were general to most members of the student body, whether they came from broken homes or not. The activities of children during the lunch hour was one of these problems. A survey of what

children did during the lunch hour, with parents as cooperative researchers, led to the establishment of a lunch hour program for eating and recreation.

Maybe no problem is "too small." Small problems can grow.

Maybe no problem is "too big." Big problems can be broken into component parts.

Maybe the really significant problem is to make sure to start the program of action research with the problems which are real to teachers and can lead to real action.—*Ruth Cunningham, associate professor of education, and research associate, Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation, Teachers College, Columbia University.*

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