

Evaluating a Child Study Program

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This article presents evaluative data regarding the outcomes of a cooperative child study program carried on in the La Grange, Illinois, schools. The authors are Robert H. Anderson, superintendent, Park Forest, and Elizabeth Zimmermann, guidance consultant, La Grange.

ONE OF THE MOST challenging and persistent problems faced by educators—the development of in-service programs for the professional growth of teachers within local school systems—has resulted in the use of such procedures as workshops, cooperative curriculum study, surveys, the use of university consultants and resource people, and local child-study groups. The experience of the La Grange, Illinois, schools and the University of Chicago, with an in-service program which combined these procedures in a three-year cooperative study, provides descriptive and evaluative data which should increase our understanding of the values in in-service experiences for classroom teachers, particularly with respect to the careful study of children.

THE COOPERATIVE STUDY

For three years (1946-49) the schools of District 102, La Grange, worked in collaboration with the University staff. Among the most important of the experiences of the Cooperative Study were the activities of child study groups and multiple activities centering about the social studies in the curriculum. It included University workshop experiences in the summer months, three fall planning conferences, work on textbook selection, an instructional materials

survey, consultant service work in certain instructional areas, emphasis on unit planning in the social studies, a survey of pupil-accounting procedures, a number of special projects and reports, and various other cooperative activities. This article is concerned primarily with the child study aspects of the total program, although it can easily be seen that the influences of the other activities and their relationship to teachers' progress in interpreting children were considerable.

Child study was included in the Cooperative Study because teachers themselves had expressed a desire for help in understanding children, because studies of learning and development carried on elsewhere pointed to the need for deeper understandings, and because child study was considered basic for both curriculum planning and the wise guidance of pupils.¹ During the first year, the area of child development was offered as one of three study group activities, and approximately half the staff chose to participate in child study. Meetings were held approximately twice a month from December to May, and teachers discussed in small groups individual observation records of children

¹ Elizabeth Zimmermann and Virgil E. Herrick, "A Child Study Program: One Phase of a Cooperative Study," *Educational Administration and Supervision*, 35 (April, 1949), p. 194-5.

in their own classes. Each teacher had chosen one child to observe, and every effort was made to eliminate subjective judgment and evaluation from the record keeping and the discussion of the observations made. Leadership was provided by the University and the school system.

During the second year all the teachers took part in child study groups which met twice monthly. Teachers also worked once each month on social studies units. Those who had worked in child study during the first year continued and expanded their analyses of individual records of children, and those new to child study learned the skills of objective observation.

At the beginning of the third year, because teachers felt that more time was needed for the social studies work, grade groups at the primary, intermediate, and upper grade levels were offered as an alternative to child study groups at the same levels. The work of the two types of groups was integrated, and joint meetings were held near the close of the Cooperative Study.

In its fourth year, and now entirely under local leadership, the La Grange program is proceeding with curriculum study and is completing the social studies work. No formal child study groups exist, but teachers are trying to base some of their curricular choices on their knowledge of child development and to apply developmental principles to the resource units which they are preparing for each grade level.

EVALUATION OF THE STUDY

Although the Cooperative Study has only recently completed its formal three-year cycle, three kinds of evi-

dence are building up which will eventually become a significant body of evaluative data. The first is contained in completed research conducted within the life span of the project. The second is in the reports and analyses still in progress within the system and in the University. The third and most important source of evidence will be in the actual changes, in curriculum as well as in method, which take place in La Grange classrooms over the next several years as an outgrowth of the attitudes and skills which were developed, or at least encouraged, by the three-year experience.

Changes in Teacher Attitudes

One completed study was an attempt to evaluate changes in teacher attitudes and understandings and changes in teacher classroom performance during the first two years.² Thirty-three La Grange teachers (and a control group of thirty teachers in neighboring communities) participated in this study wherein four types of evidence relating to teachers' understandings and teachers' classroom practices were gathered early in 1946-47 and again in the latter part of 1947-48.

The first type consisted of responses to the Purdue Teachers Examination,³ which measures teachers' understandings in the field of child growth and development, and a second more general questionnaire on educational viewpoint. The questionnaire reflected instructional

² Robert H. Anderson, *The Influence of a Cooperative Study on Teacher Test Behavior and Classroom Practices*. Unpublished Ph. D. thesis, Department of Education, University of Chicago, 1949.

³ Ida B. Kelley and Keith J. Perkins, *How I Teach*. Minneapolis: Educational Test Bureau, Educational Publishers, Inc., 1942.

practices and personal-social relationships in the classroom and was given to children in the participating teachers' classes. The third type of data was the recorded evidence of classroom observations made by the investigator with the aid of an "Observation Guide" which was constructed for that purpose. These three types of evidence became "before and after" data. The opinions of the teachers as registered on an evaluation questionnaire at the close of the investigation were gathered as a fourth type of evidence.

Briefly, the most meaningful gains for the experimental group were on the children's questionnaires, which reflected some progress on the part of the La Grange teachers toward activity education and toward a desirable classroom environment in the eyes of the children, and on the "Observation Guide" ratings. As seen by others, therefore, the La Grange teachers were making some progress by the end of the second year toward certain of the objectives of the program. The evaluation questionnaires revealed that the teachers themselves made a generally favorable appraisal of the influence of the Cooperative Study on their professional growth in certain areas, notably in their understanding of child development as it relates to the curriculum and in their approach to children both in and out of the classroom.

Interestingly, eight of the eleven teachers who participated in both years of the child study program were among the "most-improvers" on selected key questions from the Purdue Teachers Examination. This reinforces the suggestion of other studies that in-service projects, including child study, are ef-

fective when carried on over reasonably long periods of time.

Measuring Intangibles

At least one other study was completed in La Grange during the life span of the Cooperative Study. While this project did not actually measure changes or increased competencies of teachers over a period of time, it did point out certain "traits" or characteristics which seem to be important in teachers from the point of view of human relationships.⁴ Among the conclusions of this study was the statement that "competent teachers appear to possess greater insight into their actual behavior in the area of acceptance-rejection than do incompetent teachers." Such insight might be partly the result of emphasis given to acceptance of children in the child study program, at least in the case of some of the teachers. Eberman's study also points to improved techniques which are available for the scientific evaluation of child study programs.

Human relationships are difficult to measure. The whole process of understanding children and working with them, as well as the processes of understanding ourselves and other adults, must necessarily be evaluated by means which implement "objective research" until human relationships are more clearly understood. The things that are happening in the classrooms of La Grange at present, therefore, are important to consider. Certain tentative outcomes noted at the end of the second

⁴ Paul W. Eberman, *The Application of Q-Technique to One Aspect of Teaching Competency*. Unpublished Ph. D. thesis, Department of Education, University of Chicago, 1950.

year have become more widespread and noticeable.⁵ These include an increase in teacher-initiated conferences with parents, an increased interest in careful re-examination of the report card and the philosophy underlying it, and more significant comments and information appearing in pupils' cumulative folders.

Teachers in general show a greater acceptance of all children. They are more patient in dealing with children, more kind in the remarks they make, and less provoked or disturbed by the "annoying" things children do in the process of growing up. Teachers demonstrate in their conversations and written comments a greater awareness of the causes which underlie behavior in all children and a greater willingness to analyze all factors which may be operating in the case of a given child.

When children are referred to the principals or the guidance and reading counselors, they are usually children who are genuinely disturbed and for whom the teachers are seeking help, rather than the children who disturb a classroom because of an overabundance of energy or aggressiveness—the so-called "discipline cases." Teachers seem better able to deal with individual children in most situations because they can accept what children do in a less personal way. Classrooms and whole buildings seem free of tensions, in general, and both children and teachers appear happier and more natural in their relationships. School is a friendly place.

Promotion, retention, and grouping are handled in terms of what is known about child development, and each decision is a cooperative one which rep-

resents "our best judgment at the present time, in the light of what we know about this child."

TEACHER GROWTH

The study of human development has helped the La Grange teachers become aware of themselves as individuals, and to become sensitive to the needs and worth of others. As groups of teachers have continued to work together on curriculum planning, social activities, and other staff projects, they have exhibited toward each other the same basic respect which child study has caused them to exhibit toward their children. Furthermore, teachers are better able to examine ideas apart from the persons who present them than at the beginning of the Cooperative Study.

The program gave to many teachers the help they needed for assuming leadership. It helped them to understand and become a part of the in-service program, which was a common enterprise planned by all staff members. As the program continues without outside leadership, teachers demonstrate their ability to lead, to work together, to evaluate constructively, and to think through many basic problems and concerns. There is a marked feeling of responsibility for helping one another in order to have a successful program.

A final indication of the importance of child study in an in-service program lies in the verbalized desire of many teachers for more work in child development. They are expressing freely their questions as to the values of various approaches, wondering what methods might be most effective as next steps, but feeling a need to maintain a decided emphasis on understanding children.

⁵ Zimmermann and Herrick, *op. cit.*, 199-201.

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