

Evaluating Curriculum Improvement Programs

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Six conditions affecting evaluation of curriculum improvement programs are analyzed by Professor Virgil E. Herrick, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

THE VALUE of a curriculum program is determined ultimately by the quality of the changes taking place in the behavior of those affected by the program. Since staff members of school systems are active participants in the curriculum programs being considered in this article, they are at once the ones being educated and the ones assuming major roles in educating. It is not enough then that the behavior of teachers as persons is significantly changed; the ultimate value of these changes is not realized unless correspondingly significant changes are made in the lives of the children and youth with whom teachers work. The final test to which every curriculum program must be put is merely—What difference does this program make in the learning experiences of the boys and girls of this school?

Evaluation of a curriculum program might start with the question, "Are we doing the most important things in the most effective way?" Any attempt to answer this question will naturally involve continuous observation of what the school is doing, interpretation and valuing of these observations, and the projection of results of this valuing into new plans for action and their application to further experience.

The important conditions for evalua-

tion have to do with the freeing of the experience, intelligence and resources of the staff so that these factors may be brought to bear on the problem of how to improve the current educational program. This concept of evaluation and of conditions necessary to it stems from the faith that if man is free to deal with his problems, and if he has opportunity to put into effect the results of his findings, in terms of re-evaluation and re-application, improvement must take place.

Certain operations and conditions need to be considered by a staff in evaluating their curriculum program. Perhaps the following will be suggestive of these areas.

NATURE OF THE CURRICULUM PROGRAM

What teachers and administrators think a curriculum program is and what it is supposed to accomplish makes a lot of difference as to what kind of program actually turns up in September and October of the new school year. Their concept of the curriculum program affects also the nature of individual participation in it.

Some of the following questions need to be asked in examining this phase of a curriculum program: Who is participating in the definition of the nature and

scope of the program? Is the program moving toward dealing with problems considered significant by a substantial portion of the staff? Or is the program organized around inspirational speakers and problems sold to the staff or to the administration the first part of the school year? Are there frequent opportunities for people to ask where they are going and why? Will activities of the program help the teacher as a person and as a professional individual?

The point of view of the author is that when the purpose and conception of a curriculum program are constantly emerging from the on-going activities of a staff, and when these purposes and conceptions are known and used in planning and directing the program of activities, the program is likely to accomplish better results than when the opposite is true. Whatever the conception behind any curriculum program, it should be known and subject to examination.

INVOLVEMENT OF PERSONNEL

All learning programs are concerned with people. Programs of curriculum improvement are primarily the concern of teachers and staff personnel. If teachers and staff personnel are to profit from this opportunity for learning, they must be involved both as individuals and in groups.

One question then to be asked about any program is, "To what extent is the entire staff becoming involved and participating in the curriculum program?" An extension of this same question is, "To what extent are the administrative personnel becoming involved as working members in the major activities of the curriculum program?"

A program of curriculum improvement cannot continue on a sound basis unless children, staff, parents, school board and pertinent community groups become active within their appropriate spheres of interest and responsibility.

Use of Resources

An instructional program is improved when the resources necessary to insure its adequate development are identified and used. These resources may vary from a place in which to work and additional instructional materials to examine, to the securing of expert consultative help at the time and points of greatest need. At times it is futile for a committee of teachers to attempt to solve pressing problems solely on the basis of present experience and understanding. A progressive program of curriculum development is characterized by an increasing use of resources.

One important resource available to a curriculum program is the leadership potential of the staff. If the use of staff members on important committees, in various leadership responsibilities and in making constructive suggestions is increasing, rather than decreasing, the curriculum program is likely to be better than it will if the opposite is true. This factor is a rather sensitive barometer of what is happening in a staff group.

ORGANIZATION OF THE STAFF FOR LEARNING AND WORK

A number of considerations determine the nature of the organization of a curriculum program. If the curriculum program consists of an extension class taught by an instructor from a neighboring university or college, then

a certain kind of organization tends to follow. If the program is seen as a collection of committees appointed to deal with a number of specific problems, then other kinds of organization will be likely to result. If the entire staff is working on problems of major interest, then this very fact writes many directives for shaping the organization designed to encompass and facilitate this effort.

In evaluating the organization of a curriculum program several important questions need to be considered. Does the plan of organization recognize and utilize in its development both problem units and area or building units? Does the organization have sufficient flexibility so that problems, people and resources can be brought together? Does the organization permit easy communication and the modification of plans? Does the form of organization permit planning both between and among groups? Are there terminal facilities for problems, groups and leadership assignments? Do problems attacked by the staff have some tangible relationship to the curriculum of the school?

PLANNING AND THE USE OF PLANNING AGENCIES

The general principle of planning has been stated many times: planning should provide maximum opportunity for the greatest number to make the most effective effort at the most opportune time. Since much of the planning in curriculum programs is accomplished in small groups, the total scope of the planning effort is not usually evident. As the size of the staff increases, the problem of planning becomes more difficult.

Good planning in a curriculum program is often facilitated by some person or group making sure that ideas, proposals and recommendations get proper study and consideration as they develop from the idea and recommendation stages to action and policy stages.¹ Good planning in a curriculum program is facilitated also when everyone knows what the object of planning is, who is going to do it, and what the ultimate goal may be.

ADMINISTRATIVE AND PHYSICAL CONDITIONS

Curriculum programs take time, occupy space, utilize facilities and involve people. Any evaluation of such programs must consider at some point the extent to which these necessary factors have been provided for and reviewed in some relationship.

In many schools, released time, adequate space and facilities, etc., are considered important parts of a program for curriculum improvement. In other school systems, the problem of credits, bonus and salary increments, etc., is the center of much discussion. The point of the author is that a program of curriculum improvement should be a natural and important part of teaching in a given community and considered as a necessary part of a teacher's schedule and service to the community. The

¹ Many teachers and others feel that a recommendation is synonymous with action and policy formulation. Staff members should have some awareness of the total scope of successful staff action. A second aspect of this is the problem of seeing any program of curriculum improvement in some kind of time sequence. All factors of the curriculum program cannot be worked on at one and the same time; neither can they be strung out over the years so that a portion of the staff is retired before all the improvements are covered.

yearly salary of the teacher should be adequate and not dependent on bonuses for "extra effort."

Rooms with tables and chairs or with facilities easily adaptable to informal seating arrangements provide a more adequate opportunity than the usual classroom for effective staff work. More important, however, than easy chairs is the nature of the tempo of work and related anxiety factors. Working at a comfortable level rather than at the level of frustration is more conducive to effective learning on the part of all participants.

ATTENTION GIVEN THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM

Since any curriculum program should ultimately make some difference in the instructional program of a school, this portion of the evaluation is of greater importance than the other factors indicated and the relationship of the other areas to this important consideration should be studied. It is possible to divide this area into several sub-areas.

Decision Areas of the Teacher

Some of the decision areas which involve both teacher and children are those which deal with: identifying and using instructional objectives, selection and use of adequate procedures for learning, determination of the scope of items to be considered at any one time, knowing how rapidly or slowly to go, knowing what emphases to make in the things being considered, knowing the kinds of authorities to use, judging the worth-whileness of individual and group accomplishments, clarifying and emphasizing relationships, deciding the nature of respect to be offered individ-

uals, determining what accomplishment levels to expect from individuals and groups, learning procedures with which to sustain oneself in times of anxiety, understanding the nature of incentives for learning and development, etc. The evaluation of a curriculum program should consider the extent to which its activities have helped the teacher deal more effectively with the problems suggested above.

Supporting Areas of Understanding

One defect of most curriculum programs is the lack of attention paid to the concepts which teachers have about how children learn and develop, about the nature of democratic action, and about the role and function of the child, teacher and school in the total learning process.

All efforts of a staff to improve the instructional program of the school will involve at some point consideration and use of these foundation areas. A curriculum program, therefore, must take into account the extent to which it is providing opportunities for personnel to gain these understandings. Above all, such a program must insure that these understandings are actually used in the planning and developing of learning experiences for teachers and children.

Necessary Group Agreements

Well-rounded education of a child (as far as the school is concerned) is the cooperative accomplishment of a staff and extends over the period of the common school. The very nature of this cooperative responsibility demands common understandings as to things generally considered important, e.g., important objectives as to content and

process, nature of curriculum continuity, bases for evaluation, function of the teacher and school, etc. Much of the success in planning and development of a curriculum adequate in scope, continuity and organization is dependent on many of the above agreements. An effective program of curriculum improvement will actively promote the development and use of these common group agreements.

Continuing Curriculum Problems

Certain continuing curriculum problems are always present and need to be recognized and dealt with in any educational program for teachers. These problems are: identification, definition and use of instructional objectives, selection and organization of learning experiences; teaching and managing of such experiences; evaluation of learning outcomes; and planning and continued development of the learning program. These on-going curriculum problems are related to one another and draw on many supporting areas for assistance in their solution. Any curriculum program is remiss, moreover, if the teacher is not helped to deal with these problems on increasingly mature and effective levels.

Materials and Facilities

As teachers work toward improvement of the educational program, they are often confronted with problems having to do with rooms, stenographic help, professional and curriculum materials, contacting the necessary people, getting out dittoed reports, etc.

Similarly, if the improvement program is organized around a curriculum area such as social studies, language arts or science, there is always need for repre-

sentative handbooks, courses of study, text materials, audio-visual equipment and materials, and surveys of library resources. Any effort to develop a curriculum program around a project or problem area will involve a consideration of the need to identify, select and use the necessary materials and facilities.

Reports, Statements, Useful Materials

As a group works on the definition of its major objectives, which will be used for many purposes and by many sub-groups, it is highly important that a working draft of such definition be made available. Frequently, too, a larger problem area is subdivided into a number of specific parts and worked on by separate groups. Yet solution of the total problem demands that all these separate efforts be shared by each work group and that the total effort be organized around the problem of major concern. Any successful effort toward accomplishing this demands that lines of communication be kept open and frequently used.

It should be recognized, nevertheless, that the problem of communication involves more than simple discussions, informal conversations and written reports. Communication is a social and psychological problem also. People who differ in point of view frequently will not talk to one another, are unwilling to reach common agreements, and are afraid to examine comprehensively and honestly a problem and its related data. This unwillingness may be based on many reasons, but certainly among them are concern about one's prestige, threats to one's established patterns of behavior, and lack of experience in the objective, constructive discussion of problems.

An evaluation of a curriculum program should therefore pay some attention to the need for proper communication.

Problem of Interrelationships

It is rather difficult for teachers to work effectively toward improving the school program in social studies, for example, without considering at the same time the social development of children in the community, agreements on important over-all objectives of the educational program, the nature of available and needed instructional materials and resources, and the kind of reports and materials this committee should use to gain the general understanding of the staff and of the teachers who would be actively responsible for instruction in social studies.

There are very few problems which can be attacked in a curriculum program which do not demand the work products of other related activities. There is need, therefore, for some consistent, continuous effort on the part of the staff to see these interrelations and

make sure that the necessary information, plans, reports, etc., and the developing programs are brought together at a time and under the conditions which make them of maximum use to all.

Development of Over-All Plan

Any staff engaged in curriculum work must develop some comprehensive plan for its action. This plan should be evolved through continuous and co-operative study by the professional staff and the school community.

Many curriculum programs have developed in a planning and coordinating council. This agency assumes responsibility for looking at all the efforts being made to improve the work of the school and for trying to make certain that each individual activity is contributing in some measure toward an adequately conceived educational program.

Actually, provision of a better educational program for all children and youth should be the basic, underlying purpose in the planning and developing of an in-service program for teachers.

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