

Group Process and the Curriculum

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Has the instructional program benefited through the group process "movement"? This topic is discussed by Milton J. Gold, supervisor of curriculum, State Department of Public Instruction, Olympia, Washington.

"MOVEMENTS" in education have a way of climbing over the horizon, focussing a brilliant light for a time on an area of need, and gradually becoming absorbed in general educational theory and practice. Group process as a movement has run such a course in a period briefer than a decade. What was a few years ago a novelty or even a fad has finally ceased to be a "movement" at all. It has become increasingly a way of working in group situations, an insight into individual behavior in group situations, and a useful set of techniques for putting insights into practice.

School people concerned with the improvement of school programs have found a useful tool in the group process concept. It has helped to focus attention on group behavior as a fundamental factor in curriculum development. It has helped us to re-evaluate curriculum "content," so that as teachers we give more direct attention to the individual's functioning in a group.

Attention to the group and the influence of being in a group have helped curriculum workers understand such a phenomenon as "cultural lag." We have learned that practice often is not abreast of research because the individual wants group sanction before he strikes out in new directions. Also, we

have learned that group action and group opinion are powerful factors in predisposing individuals favorably to change.

The New Look

We have thus been led to take a new look at group situations—and as teachers we do almost nothing except in groups. We have discovered that a group takes on a spirit of its own and that a particular group situation will have considerable influence on the way in which an individual acts. We have had to take fresh cognizance of established knowledge that human beings take on their humanness from membership in social groupings; and that their motivation, their behavior, their aspirations are all related to the group's motivation, behavior and aspirations. As a result, reinforcement has been given to the concept that social adjustment is basic in the learning process. The titles of two excellent books that span the decade indicate the change in the orientation that has taken place. In 1940 we read *Personal-Social Development of Boys and Girls* (Lois Meek, Progressive Education Association). In 1951 we began to use *Understanding Group Behavior of Boys and Girls* (Ruth Cunningham, Teachers College, Columbia University).

The new view has also included attention to sociological factors that have always been with us but which have not in the past drawn the same attention. Warner, Davis, Hollingshead and others have made us take stock of practices that have tended to exclude certain social and economic segments of the community from school attendance although members of these segments had much to gain scholastically. In addition, the effect of cultural differences (membership in particular racial, religious or social minorities) has been pointed up. Emphasis has been placed on group attitudes toward, and group acceptance of, members of cultural minorities. Agencies working on intercultural problems have been able to place their concern in the broader perspective of group or human relations. They have made use of group process techniques to promote understanding of the problems of cultural minorities.

This new look at individual behavior in group situations has served to stress broad foundations in human relations that are the soul of the group process idea. Techniques and devices suggested in group processes are in themselves barren without an understanding of basic relations between people that are involved.

Concern with the relations that exist among individuals when they take part in groups has been of assistance in many ways in helping us to understand why individuals behave as they do in a group. We have been able to take the findings of research on the emotional needs of people and put them to use in understanding group behavior in group situations. We have had to give new attention to the tempo at which groups

can move if the individuals within the group are to come along. We have recognized that the type of leadership exercised often determines the kind of contribution that members can make. Status considerations in committees or classrooms are factors that can become a bar to free group activity unless efforts are made to neutralize feelings of differences in status.

Group Process and Staff Action

This new look has produced new emphases in the process of curriculum development. There has been a basic realization that teachers are more likely to make basic changes when those changes are sanctioned by the professional or community group with which they are identified. Also, teachers tend to strike out in new directions in proportion as they are themselves involved in exploring new fields and defining the direction that they are to take.

Because persons are more likely to take action when the group approves, it is extremely valuable in the process of curriculum development for teachers to have the feeling that a group *exists*, that there is a real working relationship among all of the teachers. It is important in a school faculty or other planning group that each individual have an opportunity to contribute to the group and that the group support each individual both as a person and as a colleague. Opportunities have been provided in many places for groups to express themselves in social situations and through various art media so that teachers who are working together can feel that they have many things in common with each other.

This kind of emphasis has re-enforced an earlier realization that the job of curriculum development is not completed when a committee writes a course of study and the board publishes and distributes it. Instead, there is a recognition that the job is meaningful only when individual attitudes and performance of teachers are changed. These changes come best through participation in group planning, group understanding and group application of conclusions to the teaching situation.

For some time the production of materials has ceased to be regarded as the primary method of curriculum development. However, when materials are produced, larger numbers of teachers are being involved. Because it is not possible generally to involve the total staff, greater attention is being given to developing group situations in which the produced materials are presented, studied and applied.

Group Process in the Classroom

Many of the contributions that group process makes to staff planning are put to use in a similar manner in the classroom.

- The principle of involvement finds expression in pupil participation in planning.
- Developing a sense that a group exists is achieved as students take part in class projects and committee work where the group is small enough for each boy and girl to take active part.
- The individual's acceptance by the group—and thus his possibility for involvement in the group—have become the subject of study leading to develop-

ment of new techniques (sociometrics) to evaluate how the group feels towards its individual members.

Teachers working in staff situations where group process is effective have learned new concepts and procedures for use in guiding student groups. They have been helped to see that each child has a need to contribute to the group and that every child wants to feel accepted and liked. Children are learning, too, more fundamental meanings of "cooperation," "discipline" and "responsibility." Responsibility is defined positively in terms of contributing ideas to a group and participating in such a way that the group can go about its business most efficiently.

Attention to the group in the classroom has also served to strengthen the emphasis on behavioral objectives. The teacher has been challenged to give greater attention to process; to how things are done; to how the student's action, attitudes and understandings are changed as a result of the learning activity. All of these involve direct attention to the individual and to the group as well as to items in the cultural heritage which are being studied.

Concern with group process has also required rethinking of the grouping normally done in the classroom as part of the reading or arithmetic lesson and of homogeneous grouping in high schools. The formation of ability groups is under serious question when these groups are inflexible, when they meet for too large a portion of the day, when they stigmatize children on a basis of academic handicaps and when they threaten feelings of personal worth, security and belonging to the

total classroom group. A group develops a certain spirit or morale which affects each of its members. This spirit can be: "We all can contribute to our class's goals," or, "We are the dumbbells, and we dare you to try to teach us."

Concern with group process also serves to support ideas concerning changes in the school plant and in schoolroom furniture. Where all communication is between pupil and teacher and almost no communication exists among the pupils, the furniture is oriented toward the teacher's preferred station. In such a situation if the furniture is fixed to the floor, the pupils' focus on the teacher only is enhanced. Attention to what happens in groups has strengthened teachers' demands for furniture which makes possible seating arrangements in which students can face each other and for a flexibility which makes possible the formation of groups of sizes that vary to meet the purpose at hand.

Working in groups has made necessary a room large enough to accommodate several small groups working individually. It has required furnishing the room with many kinds of reading matter and with instructional materials that are needed by groups that are approaching problems each in its own way.

Tricks of the Trade

Attention to what happens when people work in groups has resulted in the development of various techniques which promote effective group activity. To the extent that these techniques help group members understand their own behavior in a group situation and

understand the motivation of other group members, they are valuable. The techniques regarded as ends in themselves may serve merely to keep the group from getting to problems that are of real importance to them.

Perhaps the most successful and simplest technique that has come out of the "movement" is the buzz session. We have all come to realize in a relatively short time that communication depends on a face-to-face relationship in which each participant has an opportunity to express himself. This requires dividing groups into smaller units at times, subject to subsequent reassembly.

The size of the group and the length of time given for discussion obviously depend upon the nature of the topic being discussed and the resources of the group. Identification of problems in a stated area and posing of questions for a panel discussion are often done by student, staff or lay groups in a relatively short time. Discussion of basic matters and thinking through parts of a problem as a basis for the general group action when the buzz groups are reassembled, require longer periods of time. Frustration is likely to occur if the group is cut short before it has had a chance to come to grips with the matter.

A number of sociometric techniques have been seized upon to help evaluate the individual's degree of membership in the group. It is useful to both children and adults to recognize responsibility for teaching everybody in the group. A teacher can do much to stimulate complete acceptance for each child by using sociometric devices to discover which children are the favored companions, which children are the favored

work mates, which children are the favored playmates, which children are most admired, respected, disliked or feared. *Fostering Mental Health in Our Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1950) gives timely suggestions for putting this information to use.

Role playing has come to the fore as an effective device for discovering how the other fellow thinks, feels and acts. Persons taking opposing points of view in a discussion are asked to change places temporarily in order to build sympathy for the other person's point of view. Persons act out hypothetical situations so that groups may identify desirable and undesirable practices in such group situations as interviewing parents, working with community organizations, supporting school levies.

The group process "movement" has, through gradual maturing, become a way in which persons sensitive to individual and group reactions are working in group situations. In this sense it pervades the whole of curriculum study by staff and lay groups as a method of effective action. In this way also it pervades classroom activities, the entire curriculum, as a method of effective learning.

The concepts and techniques that have been described are in many cases not new. Attention was given to them before group process gave them concerted emphasis. The real contribution of the group process "movement" is the impetus it has given to the understanding and application of certain appropriate concepts and techniques in group situations.

Organization for Curriculum Improvement

JAMES A. HALL

Any organization for curriculum improvement should include several characteristics, according to James A. Hall, director of instruction, Denver Public Schools, Colorado.

IS THERE one form of organization which is productive of improvement in curriculum? Personal experience leads me to believe that no one form of organization will produce curriculum improvement. Curriculum improvement seems to be possible under any plan of organization that takes into account the nature of improvement and the nature of the people concerned.

A few thoughts on this subject based upon both study and personal experience may be of assistance to those who face the task of developing an improved curriculum. To make progress, any organization for curriculum improvement should include among other things the following characteristics: importance, involvement, opportunity and flexibility.

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