

Group Development in a Junior High School Student Council

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For several months a team engaged in a research project in group development studying a junior high school student council. This article reports the team's findings. Ida Stewart Brown is assistant professor, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

WHAT ATTITUDES can the school administrator hold toward experimentation in his school? He naturally resists schemes that appear fruitless or unsound. On the other hand, he is probably inclined to sanction and support those innovations he thinks promising. He must, however, evaluate any experiment he supports in order to determine whether the project or program shall pass from the designation "experimental" to that of "sound educational practice." The evaluation of any project as complex in its ramifications as an educational experiment is a major undertaking which calls for man-hours of work, scientific skills and devotion to research often not readily accessible to the school man. The graduate divisions of professional education departments in universities, hoping to foster research interest and competencies, often lack adequate meaningful research projects for their students. It would appear reasonable to postulate that if educators were willing to work at it, the universities in the

solution of their problems could make a contribution toward the solution of needs in the public schools. This paper will attempt to tell the story of such a collaborative effort in one community.

The Research Team Formulates a Plan

The group of students who became the research team in this project had previously been members of a class in group development. Attention in the class focused on group process and problem-solving skills with emphasis on the practicality of the democratic method in work groups. It was not surprising, therefore, that when they came together for a second time, to learn how to do action research, they should pose the question, "Can a group do research if it functions according to the democratic process?" Group members found the question provocative and worthy of investigation. The first decision reached was to test the hypothesis: A mature group can work together democratically—share equally in all levels of group life—and do research. The first group task was to see what demands this decision made on them as members of a team attempting research. It became apparent that all members must share in the following

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activities: selecting a project, formulating hypotheses, developing a research design, finding or constructing measurement instruments, training themselves for their tasks, assuming responsibility for work assignments, evaluating techniques when necessary, analyzing and interpreting data, and preparing a research report.

Engaging in a group research project rather than in individual projects suggested several advantages to the students: The project selected could be more comprehensive and thus give the students experience in a variety of research techniques; the group could evaluate its own process and test its hypothesis; the joint effort might make a contribution toward solution of a real problem.

A Student Council Needs Assistance

The problem selected for investigation was suggested by a group member who, as teacher and counselor in a junior high school in the vicinity of the university, had recently assumed responsibility for being faculty sponsor to the student council. He had questioned the practice of having the student council meet sporadically and then only to receive instructions or participate on a very superficial level in the solution of the school problems. He was convinced that the school would benefit if students could be involved in the solution of school problems on a much more basic level and if they could be given some help in learning group problem-solving skills so they could attack the problems more intelligently. He felt that the school had some responsibility to help students achieve a better understanding of the

democratic process and the problems of leadership in a democratic society. He also believed that students should receive the kind of help that would make their experiences in leadership successful and satisfying. With this ideological ammunition he was given permission to "experiment" with the student council by having it meet every day for one class period.

The problem he brought to the research group at this point could not be tersely stated but he asked help in evaluating this educational experiment. In very general terms he was asking, "What will happen when the student council changes from its former rather hit or miss program to this intensive kind of experience? What kind of training will be best? What effect will it have on the student government, on the children involved, and on the school as a whole?"

Many Related Areas Are Found

During the exploratory discussion of the project it became obvious that the problems we had selected had ramifications not at first apparent. It became clear that any decision concerning the kind of educational experience planned for the children must wait for the collection of other facts. We needed better understanding of such questions as the following: What do student council members actually do? What does their job involve? How do they perceive their function? What are the children like, physically, intellectually, socially, emotionally? What maturity can we expect from them concerning their capacity to deal with such concepts as leadership, democracy, responsibility? How do they behave in group situ-

ations? What skills do they have? What kinds of experiences bring them satisfaction and what activities are threatening?

Research Design Is Developed

The realities of the situation to some extent dictated our research plan. The experiment in the school was under way when the research team began its project. The student council composed of twenty-seven homeroom presidents was meeting for about forty minutes every afternoon. This circumstance created a favorable opportunity for research. The pupils' level of maturity, their problem-solving skills and their reactions to adult leadership could be observed directly by research observers in council meetings. These meetings, also, could become a direct source of information concerning the kinds of school problems confronting the council.

While we observed the council in action we could take advantage of our presence in the school to look at the over-all structure of student government as it related to the students and faculty, and to study the students at close range. A careful study of the children acting as homeroom presidents and as council members made it possible to isolate and describe the kinds of activities they were called on to perform. Since the adviser to the council was a member of the research team he was in a position to use any part of the data he found helpful in his daily planning.

Along with our interest in the observable phenomena we hoped to learn how the students felt about having been elected by their peers, what they

thought about the purposes of student government, how they would define democratic leadership, what expectations they had about participating in the student council. Some data pertinent to these questions could be deduced indirectly from the records of the observers. To get at other aspects more directly discussions and interviews could be employed.

Finally, we desired to evaluate the experiment of having the council meet every day. In the beginning we hypothesized that the experience would change the students' behavior to an observable extent and we designed rating scales to be used by the teachers in the homeroom. As we became more involved in the study, however, we became convinced that such expectations for the present experiment were unrealistic. Student council members themselves were used as the chief source of data for the evaluation. By interviews with students we hoped to be able to measure the potency of the group for its members and its outcomes as perceived by the students participating.

In short, the research design included the following: A detailed study of the structure and function of the student council; description of the children based on socio-economic status, academic achievement and scholastic aptitude; observation data concerning functional roles and problem-solving skills; rating scales completed by the classroom teachers; self-rating and adviser-rating of council members; interview data from a sample of the children following the experiment.

The research findings were formulated under six headings: (1) What does

the junior high school student council member do? (2) What kinds of skills does he need to function effectively in this role? (3) What are functional roles filled by the students in discussions? (4) The pupils' self-concepts and perceptions of leadership. (5) Evaluation of the new student council. (6) Effects on the behavior of the students of the following variables: Socio-economic standing; scholastic achievement; academic aptitude; sociometric choice status; participation in meetings.

This paper cannot concern itself with the detailed content of these reports which are intended to be of interest primarily to the administrators and teachers of the school studied. The nature of the project, including the complexity of the problem studied and the naïveté of the research workers, precludes the possibility of conclusive statements, but some generalizations seem sufficiently justified to be of use to persons in other schools charged with the responsibility of working with student government.

The first series of impressions concerns the student in his leadership role. From our observations of the students and from our interviews with them about their feelings we became increasingly aware of the discrepancy between the performance expected from the children and their adequacy for the task. The students in our study were elected by their classmates to represent them in the council and were expected to work as leaders in the homeroom. We learned that the experience of standing before thirty other adolescents to make an announcement, conduct an election, or lead a discussion is perceived by many of our

subjects as threatening if not terrifying. It can be, furthermore, an experience that tends to distort the perception of leadership and leave the children feeling helplessly inadequate and afraid of further leadership roles. The occasional student who is at home in such a situation may be motivated by personality traits which, unless understood and modified, may lead to habits of domination and aggression. Our subjects told us that they were embarrassed when they had to write on the blackboard in connection with their leadership jobs. Their poor writing and spelling, when placed on exhibit before their peers, were sources of concern. When members of their groups were disinterested, rude or rowdy, these council members found their resources were limited or lacking.

We concluded that, of the alternative solutions to this problem, the best involved the teacher. It appears necessary that each homeroom teacher be made aware of the threat to the class president in his leadership role. The teacher should think through his own behavior and that of the class as a whole so he can help the student avoid disaster rather than rescue him after he has failed. Such planning presupposes a careful formulating by the teacher of his point of view toward leadership and the democratic process in general. It presupposes also that the teacher should apply his knowledge of personality theory and learning to this student experience in the same manner in which he applies it to his subject matter. A faculty would do well to devote time to studying and formulating together as a faculty some statements of purpose for the student government

program, and perhaps to plan training for themselves by which they could become more helpful to their students. We became convinced that, until a way could be found to involve the teachers in the training program for student leaders, it would be questionable to expect the student to carry-over very much from his training experience to his homeroom leadership role.

A second point of emphasis concerns the size of the council. There were twenty-seven to thirty children in the student council we studied. We concluded that, whether a council meets occasionally as a policy-making group, or every day as in our experiment, a group of this size is too large. We had hypothesized that in the daily student council meeting the kind of climate produced would permit the members to explore and define their own values concerning leadership and membership, to gain skills, to become involved in the solution of problems that seemed significant to them, to develop respect for and the desire to fulfill a role of responsibility in their school community, to grow in independence from adult authority in their specified areas of freedom, to gain confidence in the group process of problem solving. Some of these learnings are dependent on the opportunity for repeated practice and others can occur only in a highly permissive and accepting environment. Neither condition was met satisfactorily in a group of thirty. As a result the educational objectives of the experimental student council were only partially realized. The students' evaluation of the experiment also reflected its inadequacy. Even though they were almost unanimously enthusiastic about

a daily council, they were critical of the "waste of time" when the total group was struggling with a problem. Toward the end of the experimental period the council tried various methods of breaking into smaller groups for practice, discussion and work. These smaller groups were functional and effective. These findings would suggest that the planning for a student government program which purports to be an educational experience for the pupils should include a kind of structure that permits groups to be small and to meet often. The process of these groups should give ample opportunity for students to talk about their jobs, to practice needed skills and to evaluate continuously.

The third category of generalizations concerns the administrative attitude toward student government. It became clear to us that the job of working as an adult advisor with student government demands skills, commitment and involvement often underestimated by the administrator who selects such personnel, by teachers who are his colleagues and by the advisor himself. Since the youth who experiences success in leadership roles in junior high will probably aspire to similar positions in the future it behooves educators at this level to take stock of the importance of this introductory experience. We should be critical of the practices employed which tend to discourage children from trying again or which allow students to carry distorted values or coercive and aggressive habits into new group experiences. Despite the shortcomings of our experimental council, the children who participated became aware of their responsibility to

the group and began to see student council experience as potent for their individual development as well as an advantage to the school. For these kinds of learnings to take place, planning for the student council must be shared among faculty, administrators and students and the person who carries major responsibility for advising the council should have active support from all sources.

Evaluation of the Group Research

In our preliminary planning the research team had attempted to anticipate tension spots. We predicted our crises would occur in two areas, namely the distribution of tasks among the members and the completion of assignments according to time schedule. Here, we believed, would be the crucial test of our hypothesis that a group could share equally on all levels of group life. The hypothesis would be sup-

ported if, at these times, there were no call for authoritative direction. As the team worked at its tasks, formulating hypotheses, determining methods for data collection, designing and testing instruments, anticipating the analysis of data and executing plans, our concern disappeared. The special competencies and preferences of the individuals were discovered by the total group, making the assignment of tasks almost automatic. The fact that specific assignments and the final reports were completed according to schedule and without pressure other than that applied by the group standard further supports our hypothesis.

The success of this collaborative effort suggests that public school administrators and universities may look for and receive help in the solution of certain of their research problems if they are willing to experiment together.

A Community Plans for Better Schools

PAUL E. JOHNSON

"Whether examples of action-research, cooperative research, cooperative problem-solving, or community planning, the activities mentioned in this article represent the efforts of one school-community to foster the evaluation and improvement of the educational program of its schools." This, according to the author, "is the aim of all educational research." Paul E. Johnson is curriculum coordinator, Ferndale Public Schools, Ferndale, Michigan.

THE CONCEPT that curriculum improvement depends upon desirable changes occurring in people seems to be fairly well accepted today, in principle if not always in practice. However, all

too often this has implied change in the attitudes, understandings, beliefs and behaviors only of those persons in immediate and regular contact with children in the schools. Such change is

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