Teachers who participated in cooperative action research projects in Springfield, Missouri, helped the contributor of this article learn much about teachers' feelings toward cooperative action research, the difficulties encountered, and ways to facilitate action research by teachers. Kenneth D. Wann is assistant professor of education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City.

ACTION RESEARCH BY TEACHERS as a means of improving curriculum practices in schools is receiving increasing emphasis by curriculum workers. This emphasis arises from a conviction that a teacher's own attempts to solve his instructional problems through research will have greater influence on his teaching than reading the results of research done by someone else.

Action research is the method which has been employed extensively by social scientists to guide their attempts to improve human relations. Its use by teachers in curriculum development is comparatively new and little is known about the ways in which teachers may conduct action research. Information is needed which will aid curriculum workers in helping teachers to initiate and conduct such research. The author has recently completed a study designed to secure information regarding teacher participation in action research. Teachers who had participated in a number of cooperative action research projects in Springfield, Missouri, were asked to indicate the way they felt about their involvement in such research. The following sections of this article will report some of the things learned from teachers about their feelings toward cooperative action research, the difficulties encountered, and ways to facilitate action research by teachers.

Teachers' Feelings about Action Research

When teachers who had participated in cooperative action research were asked to indicate how they felt about the process of study their replies usually fell into three areas. They never failed to point out that the methods used were closely related to their regular classroom activities; they often discussed how action research differs from other methods of study which they have encountered; and they frequently mentioned the satisfactions which they experienced in conducting research.

Very Practical for Busy Teachers

Most of the participating teachers mentioned the fact that they were able to use all findings directly in their own classrooms. They indicated that this is the feature that would cause them to recommend action research to other
teachers as a very desirable way of studying professional problems. Several practical aspects of the procedures used in the projects were mentioned frequently by teachers.

Teachers are busy and are quite justifiably reluctant to undertake in-service professional study which they cannot see contributing directly toward solution of their teaching problems. Teachers who participated in the action research said that the way in which the research has been related to classroom procedures and problems is a factor which has made it possible for them to carry on the study without jeopardizing the quality of their teaching. Even though they felt that time to carry on the study was a problem, they were pleased to discover that it was "possible to find out things you do not know within the stream of ordinary classroom work."

There was a feeling on the part of many teachers that the mere use of the methods of study which they employed caused them to change their ways of teaching. They felt that the findings resulting from their study contributed to increased knowledge of the need for change, but they credited the process of study with causing them to change as they worked. An example of this was found in the school which was studying the choices youngsters make. The group decided to observe and record the kinds of choices children made in various situations during the school day. The teachers pointed out that, because of this method of study, they put forth an effort to create more and more situations in which children had opportunity to make choices. Another example of change resulting from the process of study came from a school where the staff was studying planning. The teachers were investigating the extent and quality of children's participation in planning and they found themselves seeking more opportunities for children to plan in order to have situations for observations.

Different from Other Methods of Study

Many of the teachers who participated in the cooperative action research project described it as different from other ways in which they had studied professional problems. The other ways are the procedures employed in curriculum improvement programs in many schools and school systems: discussion groups to discuss professional problems and professional readings, committee work to prepare curriculum materials, classroom visitation, case studies of children, and others. When individuals were asked to indicate ways in which the research was different from other methods of study, a number of aspects were mentioned.

Teachers said that the research they had been conducting was more vital to them because they were studying problems at firsthand, and not just reading about the way someone else had solved his problems. Study and research came to mean looking at vital teaching problems and attempting to do something about them by bringing to bear insights gained from reading, from studying children, and from sharing ideas with others on the problem under consideration.

Comments from many teachers emphasize the fact that there is a difference between study methods that had been
used previously and action research which makes the latter more significant to teachers. One teacher pointed out that before this, research had been something that was always done by someone else, and about which he read if it seemed to apply to his problem. He added that even after reading, the application of findings from another’s research to his problem was not always clear to him. He felt that in conducting action research his group was actually involved in analyzing real problems and doing something about them. In this same connection, another teacher suggested that action research is “like the new ideas of education. You are actually doing your research instead of just seeing it done.”

Some of the teachers felt that a fundamental difference between their action research and other methods of study was that the research began with firsthand contact with children in the classroom, and with the real problems teachers face in teaching children. They stated that they had seen implications of what they could do for children more clearly because they were studying children and working with children in terms of specific teaching problems. One teacher pointed out, “In the past, we just studied about children—about teaching. Now we are studying teaching. We are studying children and trying to make some changes in their behavior as we study them.”

Teachers felt that the action research project gave them a framework for their study. The research began with problems which the teachers themselves identified as important in their classroom teaching. Their study of children, their reading, and their experimentation with new procedures were all directed toward the solution of the problems. They kept records as a means of checking the effectiveness of their efforts to improve their teaching. They were able to see results from their efforts and to make modifications intelligently in their teaching procedures. Teachers appreciated the purposeful activity resulting from this method of study.

One group of teachers said that even though the staff of their school had attempted for a number of years to study specific problems, they had never been systematic in the collection of evidence to prove or disprove ideas they might have had. Other teachers felt that the action research project caused them to go more deeply into their problems because it meant more to them.

Many of the teachers said that participation in the cooperative action research had been a satisfying experience. Teachers felt that, even though study of this type is time consuming and offers many problems to those untrained in action research techniques, it was well worth their efforts. They felt so keenly about the satisfactions to be derived from this kind of study, that they would urge other teachers to carry on action research in their own classrooms.

The first source of satisfaction mentioned by many teachers is the fact that the methods of study used enabled them to get new insights into reasons for children’s behavior and into procedures for helping youngsters improve their behavior. Teachers referred to this as a “fresh look at children’s behavior” because they said that they were doing something about the behavior as they studied it, rather than
"In the past, we just studied about children—about teaching. Now we are studying teaching. We are studying children..."

"just talking about doing something." They were insistent that such procedures as they used in studying children succeeded in pulling the teacher a little closer to children and in giving him an understanding he would be unable to get in any other way.

Another source of satisfaction mentioned frequently is the fact that many teachers have been interested in working on the same problems. Teachers pointed out that the interest of other people in a problem added significance to the problem. The point they made was that they had often wondered whether their ideas were worth while, but after groups of people began working with the same ideas they no longer experienced those doubts. One teacher, in referring to the efforts of her group to study and improve the quality of the suggestions made by children, said, "That is one need we have always accepted, but the idea that there are other people who are interested in studying these generally accepted procedures and in learning how to improve them is encouraging."

Teachers have said that there is security in cooperative endeavor. They have found great satisfaction in being able to talk a problem through with their school staffs. At all stages they found satisfaction in group planning and in group analysis of the data which individual teachers collected. One school group pointed out that "teachers in planning procedures on a specifically agreed upon problem gained new insights as they shared their thinking and tested reactions to results."

One other source of satisfaction to teachers who engaged in the study was the feeling of personal growth that
they experienced. The satisfaction that comes from the feeling that new understandings and new insights have been achieved was identified frequently by the teachers. The growth to which reference was made took the form of increased understanding of children, new insights into ways to improve classroom teaching, increased skill in observing and recording behavior, and increased confidence in the individual's ability to interpret research data.

**Difficulties Encountered by Teacher Researchers**

Teachers who reported on their participation in the cooperative action research projects did not give the impression that there had been no problems. They encountered many difficulties in conducting their research and they believe that other teachers who attempt similar studies will have the same experience. Most of the teachers felt that the satisfactions to be achieved far outweighed the difficulties involved. Some even felt that the pitfalls or barriers encountered contributed significantly to their understanding of curriculum problems. It is necessary, however, for teachers, administrators, and curriculum consultants to understand the difficulties teachers face in conducting cooperative action research if this method of improving instruction is to become widespread.

**Making the Study Cooperative**

Making the study truly cooperative posed problems. If teachers are to develop plans and evaluate results cooperatively, they must have opportunities to meet together for periods of time sufficient to talk difficulties out and reach agreements. This was not always possible to the extent to which teachers felt it should have been. They pointed out lack of time as playing an important role in this difficulty. It was hard to find time to meet together when teachers could bring their undivided attention to the job of research. Individuals and groups found it hard to communicate with one another. It was difficult to understand the ideas others were trying to express and to reach agreements as to what should be studied and observed. Most teachers felt a lack of satisfactory ways to carry an entire staff along when it was necessary to delegate responsibility to committees.

**Using Research Techniques**

The procedures employed for studying children gave rise to two problems. Although an effort was made to keep the procedures employed in studying children and collecting data about their behavior closely related to the classroom activities of teachers it was difficult to find time to observe and record behavior adequately and to use the scales and projective devices developed. To many teachers the time involved was not the most serious difficulty. They lacked skill in using projective devices and making observations, anecdotal records, and questionnaires. They felt that what they needed was experience and help in using the techniques and that with increased facility in their use the time problem would be reduced.

**Other Difficulties**

Other difficulties were identified by teachers from time to time. The practice in action research of leaving purposes and methods of study open to
continuous re-examination and redefinition caused many teachers to lose perspective at times. This resulted in confusion and discouragement. It was also difficult to obtain help from consultants as frequently as teachers felt was necessary. This problem and the one of sharing ideas and ways of working among schools participating in the study were two areas in which teachers felt much improvement was needed.

**Facilitating Cooperative Action Research**

This study of teacher participation in cooperative action research revealed many ways in which teachers need help if they are to conduct effective curriculum research. It is difficult for people who work with teachers to realize the importance teachers place on help and support from administrators and consultants. Teachers felt that one of the major factors in the success of their cooperative action research was the attitude of the administrative staff of the schools toward research and experimentation by teachers. Administrators who desire a sound program of curriculum improvement through cooperative action research in the schools must make administrative arrangements which serve to facilitate such a program.

**Time for Teachers To Participate**

The practice in most school systems of continually adding to teachers' loads and never subtracting from them operates against effective curriculum study. Teachers felt that finding time to carry on the activities involved in cooperative action research was the greatest difficulty they encountered. An effort was made to alleviate this difficulty somewhat by the provision of substitute teachers who relieved teachers of classroom responsibilities for study and planning. Teachers were appreciative of this help. Administrators, however, will need to study other ways of providing time for those teachers who participate in research. Attention should be given to the reduction of classroom and extra classroom duties. In many school systems additional clerical help could relieve teachers of much of the statistical work involved in reports and records and of the responsibility involved in collecting fees and purchasing supplies.

**Consultants for Teachers Who Participate**

Teachers who engage in cooperative action research need guidance and help from persons who have had experience with the techniques and ways of working involved in this method of curriculum study. Teachers who participated in the action research projects valued highly the consultative help they received. They wanted and needed more help than they were able to get. There was a need for a sufficient number of consultants to work consistently with teachers engaged in action research. The stimulation resulting from bringing in consultants from outside the school system at intervals is beneficial but it cannot outweigh the value of a consultative staff available for help whenever needed.

Consultants who help teachers with cooperative action research must give careful attention to the way in which they work. They must assume the dual role of giving guidance and direction to research while helping and encour-
aging teachers to take the major responsibility for planning and directing their study.

It is necessary to help teachers get the job done without usurping their prerogatives.

Provision for Exchange of Ideas

Communication among teachers and schools participating in the research was a problem teachers frequently mentioned. They considered it very important to be able to know what other school staffs were doing to carry their research forward. During the progress of the study several attempts were made to provide opportunities for the sharing of ideas among schools. Meetings were held at which teachers reported on the research under way in their schools and discussed ways of working. Teachers were not satisfied with these meetings because they were not able to probe deeply enough into ways of working to get real help with their problems. They suggested that in future studies administrative arrangements be made for staffs of two schools working on related problems to get together from time to time to share ideas and help with plans. The use of recording devices to record research meetings was suggested as another means of exchanging ideas.

Developing a Desirable Professional Climate

The professional climate of the schools is a significant factor in the successful development of cooperative action research. This approach to curriculum improvement requires a climate in which teachers feel free to talk about problems which exist in their schools, to devise ways of studying these problems, and to try out new ways of working which give promise of improving their teaching. Teachers felt that this climate existed in their schools. They felt that the administrative staff stood ready to support teachers who try out what seem to be better ways of working and teaching even when they make mistakes.

It was apparent to those who worked with the teachers in the development of the action research projects that the high morale was not due to the actual amount of material aid the administration was able to provide. The school system was not always able to provide funds for all the help necessary. The morale was due rather to the consistent observance of the policy of active participation by teachers in all matters pertaining to the operation of the schools and to consistent support of teachers' efforts to improve the schools.

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