

Our Research Responsibilities

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This article maintains that the greatest need of our association, and of education in general, is "for voluntary participation in cooperative evaluation of some significant phase of school practice in an undefensive, honest quest for improvement." Laura Zirbes is professor of education, Ohio State University, Columbus, and is also author of "Teachers for Today's Schools," a pamphlet published by ASCD.

OURS IS A DYNAMIC ASSOCIATION, committed to concern for curriculum development and the improvement of teaching and learning. These commitments and concerns have vitalized our study, discussion and action as well as our publications. They have given us a corporate sense of responsibility and leadership which calls for vision, sound judgment and strategic timing in the projection of values into plans and programs of organizational action. Our current emphasis must therefore be concerned with professional needs that have significant and timely bearings on curriculum development and educational advance. We must survey the social and educational scene to discern the conditions that call for forward adjustments in our planning and in the cooperative participation of our far-flung membership.

We cannot fail to note that reactionary criticism is retarding educational advance and obstructing curriculum development. Divisive strains and tensions within the profession seem to play into the hands of public criticism. Social change and educational change seem to be so threatening to those who are already insecure that they resist and oppose forward adjustment in favor of

tradition or the status quo. Organized reactionaries threaten democratic institutions under cover of the communist threat using the smear tactics and propaganda devices of totalitarianism to undermine professional leadership and cast suspicion on teachers. Misrepresentation of educational ideas and positions confuses the public judgment and interferes with communication and understanding. Young people are diverted from the choice of teaching as a profession by the low regard in which it is held by those who air their prejudices and voice their opinions in the public press. Educational advances long overdue are blocked by the teacher shortage and inadequate school funds at the very time that population trends call for expanded school programs and facilities. The educational lag widens as social change and advancing frontiers in the basic social sciences make tradition more and more unreliable as a guide to rising generations and to those who are professionally responsible for public education.

NEED TO CLARIFY CONCEPTIONS

Under these conditions the disposition to oversimplify, distort and exaggerate differences which characterize

divergent points of view or points on the way to better schools is dangerous and obstructive even when it is used without intent to obstruct. Instead of clarifying conceptions and contributing to mutual understanding it obscures or refutes the significant differences and trends by either-or assumptions that do violence to truth in order to emphasize arbitrary categories. This sets up and builds up divisive tensions based on a misrepresentation of reality. Those who are already troubled by change which they do not understand quite naturally assume that the proposition is a statement of fact and that proposed changes are even more extreme and alarming than they had realized. They are thus inclined to align themselves in entrenched positions against change and against those who advocate it. The dynamics of pro and con blocs works to make partisans of others and to arouse antagonisms which lead to hostile disruptive movements with unhappy consequences of long duration regardless of which side "wins."

AN ILLUSTRATION: PLANNED
OR UNPLANNED CURRICULUM?

A curriculum discussion which begins with the proposition that there is an issue between the planned curriculum and the unplanned may be used to illustrate this point and to indicate why and how a scientific, more analytical study of differences and a clarifying approach through research are so urgent in a period of change, criticism and controversy.

• The preplanned curriculum of earlier days was found to be too fixed and inflexible in the light of changing conditions. Furthermore, it sanctioned

arbitrary standards and conformity whereas differences in situations, classes, individual abilities and needs made conformity and fixed expectations undesirable. Furthermore it was based on subject matter logic and projected when so little was known about learning, behavior, development and adjustment that teacher training emphasized empirical methods and developed these into "directions to teachers." Supervision was concerned with the submissive adherence of teachers to prescriptive directions and requirements in courses of study and assignments. With increasing insight into learning and development, and with the improvement of teacher education old texts and courses of study based on them became anachronistic and were supplanted by materials which left room for teacher-planning in terms of developmental needs.

• Meanwhile insight into behavior indicated that pupil participation in planning was not only conducive to more purposeful learning but consistent with democratic values and essential to the development of responsible choices. Since life in a free society calls for competence in making choices and plans, and also for cooperative planning in terms of concern for the common good, this aspect of education for self direction and citizenship made guided experiences in planning essential and made the regimentation and autocratic direction of teachers and children anachronistic. While those who confused democratic procedures with laissez-faire assumed that this was synonymous with letting children do as they pleased, and those who were inclined to mistrust freedom assumed that stern repressive discipline was preferable, increasing evidence to the contrary became available with cumulative data

on mental hygiene and the socialization of children.

- Meanwhile there were also developmental studies and experiments which indicated that the logical assumptions of subject matter specialists regarding the sequences and systematic approaches of pre-organized instruction were all too often based on a specialist's adult analysis that had little reference to meaningfulness for children, and that they were quite often at odds with psychological, developmental planning and guidance. Studies of remedial cases indicated how learning was blocked by the oversimplifications and formalities of highly systematic piecemeal approaches, in which meaning and use were subordinated while rote learning and mechanical skills were given priority. Functional approaches in which this order was reversed were pursued experimentally, and long term comparisons in various fields indicated that direct firsthand experience and early reference to concrete uses and life contexts made practice and insight into relationships and processes more meaningful.

- As a direct consequence the need for fixed subject matter sequences was challenged, and teachers were freer to plan in terms of functional approaches through direct experience in an expanding social environment. While this was criticized and condemned as "incidental learning" or "lack of plan," it was actually more functional, more developmental, and more flexible situational planning with provision for pupil participation and guidance toward self direction and social responsibility.

- It takes more professional insight and judgment to teach and guide in terms of such flexible cooperative planning than it does to follow a fixed text, plan or blueprint. Furthermore, children

who are to be developed as citizens of a free dynamic society should not be manipulated through a fixed, blueprinted pre-planned curriculum. The forward adjustments of planning in American schools take account of the need for flexible adjustable personalities but also for responsible citizenship in a free society. These forward adjustments of curriculum and procedure can be evaluated. Such evaluations must produce evidence of the values with which curriculum development is concerned. That is curriculum research.

If it is assumed that the ability to use facts in relationship is more valuable than the rote memorization of facts, evidence needs to be sought to test, refute or validate that assumption.

If it is assumed that functional learning is more conducive to use and carry-over, evidence can be secured by research.

If it is assumed that children can and should be learning to plan, effective curricular means can be developed and improved by evaluative research and the evidence can be made available to the profession and the public.

Such matters cannot be settled by argument or controversy which assumes that the issue is a simple matter of planning or no planning. Nor can education be advanced by an either-or decision. Educational advances depend on clear evidence of the need for forward adjustments in education, and competent leadership in the pursuit of values worth striving for. The evidence of such values validates curricular developments. The process is cumulative and continuous because education should never stand still or assume that there is no room for improvement, nor should the assumption that schools

were better in "the good old days" go unchallenged by research.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION IN A QUEST FOR IMPROVEMENT

The preceding presentation is an uncontroversial analytical consideration of a long term curriculum concern with *planning*, and a considered approach to research as a substitute for unconsidered curriculum change or controversial criticism. It is also a challenge to devotion to tradition and fixed ideas. Parents and citizens can set education back by their nostalgic insistence on the superiority of traditional practices. Without incentives to growth teachers can become so addicted to their routines and habits that they feel threatened and insecure when forward adjustments are proposed. Such feelings are conducive to professional stagnation and to serious mental hygiene difficulties if they persist.

The surest safeguard against such maladjustments and their cumulative consequences is voluntary participation in cooperative evaluation of some significant phase of school practice in an undefensive, honest quest for improvement. The process can become so intrinsically satisfying and rewarding that it is continued and extended in ways that contribute positively to mental health and general professional effectiveness.

Cooperative research needs to be projected in terms of a long-term program which puts first things first and moves education forward. It is an urgent responsibility in times like ours when irresponsible criticism uses the strat-

egies of totalitarianism in a cold war on educational advance.

What are the first things that need to come first? Sound criticism and true leadership are needed to discover and analyze the tensions and issues on which the profession is divided. A problem inventory will indicate what these are and give some basis for the projection of a program of research, but there are also other bases for priority and long-term planning.

Social change and advances in the basic social sciences call for a thoroughgoing, creative type of research in which the findings provide the basis for a reorientation and redesign of curricula and experimentation in the implications for practice. Such sources of vision and advance can be developed by drawing on the leadership within our membership and in related professional organizations as well as on leadership in anthropology, psychology, sociology and psychiatry, so that education can benefit directly by an integrative consideration of implications from the frontier thinking in these fields. Together such persons could also consider the broader implications of social change and world tension for the guidance and education of children and youth in the years ahead—for teacher education and adult education. Research that proceeds without benefit of such basic reorientation can hardly be expected to contribute to the reduction of the educational and cultural lag. The prospect is challenging to our organization because our commitments make vision and action based on research a responsibility.

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