

## From Our Readers

Contributor: S. G. B. Robinson

*Again we present a letter from one of our readers. Mr. S. G. B. Robinson, executive secretary of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, Toronto, Canada, attended his first ASCD convention in Boston last February. Comments and suggestions such as these should help our association in improving each year's convention offerings. Further, they should remind us again of the importance of making each person feel welcome and secure in the group to which he is assigned.*

DEAR EDITOR: I had some misgivings about attending the 1952 ASCD Convention in Boston since my background (a) in group dynamics and (b) in modern curriculum study, is admittedly negligible. I have not given too much thought to curriculum since I was chairman of the Curriculum Committee quite a number of years ago. After giving thought to what I should attempt to do in Boston, it seemed to me that my time might be best spent in gaining first, some notion of the techniques of group dynamics and second, whatever views I might be able to pick up on modern curriculum development. Of course along with these aims I hoped to be able to gain some ideas of the general views on education held by American teachers.

There were approximately 2,000 people attending the convention which was centred in some four hotels with headquarters at the Statler. The convention was organized into six separate sections with from five to ten subsections or groups in each section.

There were perhaps thirty people in the group to which I was assigned. The majority of these appeared to be teachers and professors from teachers colleges and education departments of universities. I had better state here and now that my experiences in this group were most painful to say the least. The group started out to explore

the problems of the individual members. The leader pointed out that such exploration should precede any real discussion on the theme of the group. This seemed a logical approach. However, at this point several professors of education began to outline not what were problems but rather the achievements of their particular institutions during the past year in certain bits of alleged research. As each professor stated his case, others in the group attempted to show that the piece of work was either not particularly significant, or had not been approached from the right end of the educational system, or the original situation had not been properly measured before the change was instituted, or the piece of research had not covered a sufficient number of cases to give it any validity, or proper records had not been kept to assess its significance after five years' time etc., etc., etc.

The end result of this slug-fest was rather pitiful and completely fruitless. It was all carried on in pedagogical jargon and for a time I thought I was the only person who had to translate everything that was being said into plain Canadian English or Anglo-American. However, I found later that about half those present were as much in the dark as I, even though they were Americans and they were equally disgruntled. Two members of

the group finally managed to corral all the discussion and the thing from there forward became a dialogue between these two who apparently were attempting to confound each other by the use of advanced "pedaguese."

The second day was simply a continuation of what happened on the first day. I had become so completely disgusted with the aimlessness of the whole group, and so frustrated in finding that we had used two-thirds of our total time without discussing the topic which had been assigned to the group, that I decided that I must try to join a second group, if I was to be able to form any true picture of what the ASCD was doing in its annual convention. I was convinced by this time that the convention could not be as bad as this sample and that I had been most unfortunate in putting my hand in the grab bag and pulling out this particular specimen.

I did get these notions from listening to the discussion:

(1) Everybody seemed to be perturbed that the teachers were not taking any real part in the development of curricula. They felt that it should be developed largely by the teachers themselves.

(2) Nobody seemed to feel that it was safe to let the teachers at the present time do too much in forming the curriculum, since they felt that the teachers would not come up with the right answers.

(3) They seemed to believe that it would be well to interest the teachers if at all possible in curriculum development, so long as the actual planning and development was left in the hands of superintendents, teachers college faculty members and such. In fact one gentleman said, "If we could only get the teachers interested in forming a curriculum such as we would want,

without letting them know, while they are doing it, that they were doing what we wanted them to do, then the problem would be solved."

(4) It seemed to be evident that when curriculum changes were contemplated these professional experts were in the habit of going into a school system in order to initiate and plan the curriculum changes. In other words a team of experts went into the job, presumably with the help of the teachers and members. However, they complained that as soon as they went into a school area, they got a suspicious acquiescence from the teachers to all ideas which they proposed, and they wondered how they could overcome the teachers' suspicions and fears. I wondered why the teachers feared these people but did not get the opportunity of asking that question. It seemed to me that these experts in psychology would have done a little soul searching when they recognized that their very presence in a local school system seemed to create fear, suspicion, and lack of security—as many of them admitted freely and without being asked.

(5) From this group it would seem to be evident that very little is being done in the building of curriculum by the American teacher per se. They talked a lot about the present system of the superimposed curriculum as against what they claimed they wished to have, the self-selection curriculum. Along with this, I made quite a collection of rare items of what I would choose to call pedagogical terminological inexactitudes. I arranged these in the form of a glossary for later use.

### **A Better Experience**

On the third day of the group meetings, I managed, through special permission, to get into a different group.

**NEW! . . .**

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*University of Florida*

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This group had been discussing group techniques and when I joined it, was in process of examining a tape recording of a staff meeting in one of the suburban high schools which was conducted on the group dynamics principle. After listening to the staff meeting there followed an extremely lively and complete discussion of strengths and weaknesses, the advisability of taking a vote in a meeting run on group process principles, and a wealth of valuable criticism backed up by people who had had experience in the group dynamic process. I found here a group of people who appeared to be mature, balanced and competent in the fullest sense of the word. While I could not, in the brief time I was with them, gain as much as I would like to have, I was able to observe a group working in a most effective manner following group procedures. Moreover, my estimate of the American educational system which, it must be admitted, was rather low after my first two-day experience, became much higher. During those first two days I felt I had wandered into a pedagogical mad house. My experience with this second group showed that I had first been unfortunate and that the people that I had met in the first group were, as these American professors would say, atypical.

I am extremely glad I went. I feel that I got a great deal from the convention. Some of my pre-conceived views I found were very, very wrong; some were substantiated by what I saw, but I gained many constructive ideas which are of a real value to me personally and I hope may be of value to the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation.—*S. G. B. Robinson*, executive secretary, Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

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