

# *Involvement Is Important in Research*

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When teachers, students and parents are actively and thoughtfully involved in research, its findings are more likely to bring about effective school improvement.

WE HAVE long recognized the fact that effective school improvement rests on the principle that those affected by changes in a school system should have some voice in determining the changes to be made. We have developed in recent years innumerable planning committees, in-service workshops, grade level meetings of teachers, planning meetings for teachers carrying on work in so-called "block schedules," extensive lay participation in curriculum planning, teacher-pupil planning, and various forms of teacher participation in school administration. Yet in spite of all these efforts to involve those affected in the making of the school program, little attention has been given to the important area of involving teachers, parents and students in the conduct of the educational research which should be the basis of school improvement, and which should certainly be conducted to determine the effectiveness of changes which are made.

The strength of a pattern of school improvement which involves teachers, parents and students rests on the fact that it takes into account the feelings of the people involved as well as the more objective factors in the situation.

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Change itself carries with it an emotional challenge to the persons affected by it. This is particularly true in schools. For teaching and learning are not concerned with subject matter alone. They are affected by many factors, such as the relationship between the teacher and student and that among the students themselves. They are also affected by the expectations of parents, of teachers and of students. They are influenced by the picture which each person involved has of himself.

It is, then, with this entire galaxy of behaviours, attitudes, information and understanding that we must be concerned in our efforts to improve the school program. And it is with this complex pattern as it appears to the individual that we must deal in educational research. It is the failure to involve those who carry on the educational program in our schools which accounts in large measure for the lag which exists between the findings of educational research and their application in practice.

Consider the research in reading as an example. There is probably more research in reading than in any other aspect of education, and all of it indicates that readiness to read is not directly correlated with chronological age. Yet a visit to almost any school

system will reveal first grade teachers who still feel that every child should read before he leaves the first grade, and that those who do not do so are "slow learners." At the same time the various ways of developing the readiness which research has rather specifically defined are often ignored, in spite of the fact that such readiness is known to be essential before reading can be properly developed. This research has been widely disseminated. It is not tagged with the label of "progressive education." It is a part of the training of primary teachers. Yet it has not been universally put into practice.

### Why Teacher Resistance?

The reasons given for teacher resistance to these research findings are typical of those which characterize much of the resistance to other innovations in education, whether these are based on research or on reports of practice. Some of the reasons which seem to lie back of such teacher resistance are the following:

1. One basis for objection seems to lie in the difference in the mechanical conditions under which the research was conducted.

"This is a different community. My students are more advanced."

"I have too many children in class. That research was designed for an ideal situation."

"That would be all right if I had the readiness materials they used. I am limited by my supplies."

—Such comments shut off the idea without examination of the principle which was established by the research.

2. A second basis for objection seems to be the fear of the parents in the com-

munity. Teachers labor under the impression that parents want things done the way they were done when the parents were in school. Here the objection is couched in terms of its being a different group of parents, or of questions or difficulties with parents which have happened at other times in the school.

3. "The next teacher expects me to have taught them to read."—This fear of the expectations of the teachers who are to get the children is inevitably voiced and related to the problem of standards which are fixed rather than being adaptable. It is nearly always accompanied by statements from the next teacher that the children cannot read in spite of the efforts of the first grade teacher.

4. "I have tried it and it doesn't work." Or, "I've taught my way for a long time, and my children don't have any difficulty." The first three evidences of resistance had to do with misunderstandings and fear of misunderstanding. This objection, however, has to do with the teacher's not being willing to examine or not knowing how to examine his own practice objectively.

5. "I may be old fashioned, but I believe it should be the way it is. That's what happened to me, and it didn't hurt me any." This type of comment illustrates how deeply our beliefs are rooted. It is in this firm belief in things as they are that much resistance to change takes place.

These examples of resistance to the use of findings of research are to be found in almost any situation in which current practice is being challenged and new practices are being introduced. The fact that the new practices are based on valid educational research has

little bearing on their acceptance unless a way can be found to help the individual teacher challenge present practice or present beliefs. In a large western city a few years ago, research was conducted in a school which revealed that the students in core classes which were not necessarily taught by regular English teachers did better on a standard English examination than those who were in English classes of the usual type. When the findings were presented to the English department, they refused to believe the facts. The examiner asked whether they thought he had tampered with the figures, falsified the results, or been dishonest in any way. "No, we think you are honest about it. We just don't believe these findings," was the reply. These teachers were honest enough to admit that they would not question their beliefs, and the fact remains that they did not question them at all.

Certainly there is no panacea which will remedy the distrust with which teachers, and parents too, often approach the findings of educational research. The challenge, however, is clear. We must find some way to conduct research in such a manner, and on such problems, that teachers, parents and students will accept the results, or at least use them to question their own thinking. One way to approach this is through research which is designed for involvement of all those who are affected by the investigation. Certainly the objections that the setting is different, materials inadequate, findings inappropriate for a certain number of children could not be made by a teacher who had helped set up the hypothesis, and conduct the study of doing things

differently. Similarly, the fear of the next teacher or of parents is eliminated if they are in on the research, take part in planning what is to be done, and in evaluating the results. It is a partnership, and the teacher who conducts the activity is only the agent of the others. The judgment becomes one of carrying out the terms of the research rather than of meeting the demands of the next teacher. Data collected by the teacher and parents and children themselves may serve to bring new vistas into the thinking of all involved. One begins to question his past experience when his present experience says something different. One does not need to minimize his past successes when he finds a way to become even more successful. In the involvement of teacher and parents comes the mutual vision which makes each examine his own practice and find ways of improving it. Involvement alone will not do the trick. But if the problem is a genuine one, accepted by all those involved, if the ways of testing it are adequately worked out, then it is reasonable to suppose that new insights will result.

### **Characteristics of Classroom Research**

But how can teachers, whose time is already filled with more than they can accomplish, carry on research as well? It would appear first of all that if teachers and parents, as well as students, are to carry on research, then that research must have certain well defined characteristics:

1. It must center about problems with which teachers are genuinely concerned. This means that it will differ in pattern and problem from the sta-

tistically defined research which depends upon thousands of cases for establishing a fact, except in cases where it is a summarizing of such facts as the occupations of high school graduates or reasons for drop out in a particular school. Research which involves teachers must be concerned with the problems of daily teaching. For example, a group of teachers in Springfield, Missouri, were concerned with effective pupil-teacher planning. But they felt that many children failed to carry through the plans which they made. How could they tell? They decided to observe three children over a period of three weeks; to get a full week's record of each child during a specific planning and follow-through period each day. They selected one child who was excellent, one average, and one who was very poor. When their observations were completed, they discovered that all children followed through the minimum planning, but there were five different degrees of follow-through which were easily observable. They had determined a scale by which they could observe and rate their student's ability to work in planning; they had also learned how to get information on any intangible problem which concerned them, but they had not established a generalization which would hold for all children, all classes everywhere.

2. Research which involves teachers must be concerned with the problem in its total setting with all the factors involved, rather than with isolating one variable to be tested. This is true both because that is the way in which problems arise for the teacher and the way in which the teacher must meet them. One research student who

spent considerable time in classrooms trying to find ways of applying research techniques said, "But there are so many variables, and so many things going on that I can't isolate any particular one." That illustrates another difficulty with the traditional patterns of educational research. Newer patterns must be developed which follow more nearly the patterns of case studies or of sociological research in which every possible factor is identified. The teacher who kept a daily diary of her experiences with an experimental class provided material from which the problems of the teacher who experiments in a large, traditional school could be as readily and accurately defined as in a questionnaire study. Similarly, her diary provided a picture of teacher growth which could be substantiated by quoted comment and did not suffer from the limitations of either the "before and after" testing device or the faulty recollection of changes which had been made.

3. Research in the classroom must be practicable for the teacher. This means that the types of records kept must either be brief and be useful for the teaching process itself, or that help must be given teachers for making the necessary records to provide research evidence. It is on this snag that much research involving teachers is lost. It would be worth while to consider the use of a clerical research assistant wherever teachers are involved in research. In fact, it may be possible to involve parents in the research at this point in the procedures.

4. Research in which parents, students and teachers are involved must be concerned primarily with action and

only secondarily with generalization. The major focus of interest for the teacher, parent and student is the immediate working situation. They must see ways of improving that situation, and to that end will be concerned with studying the situation. This meets one of the difficulties of the traditional research pattern—the problem of getting the research translated into action—but fails to provide the generalizations or “truth” with which research is customarily concerned. There is a problem, then, in putting together the research studies focused on action in order to gain the needed generalizations.

5. Research of this type will, in all probability, be centered largely on evaluative devices. It will tend to measure the effectiveness of different methods, different content, different efforts to develop students in emotional as well as social and intellectual ways. It will not be concerned with control groups in this evaluation, but with records which deal with continuous growth and response to situations presented.

6. Research of this type lends itself to longitudinal studies. Research which involves students, parents and teachers is particularly adaptable to long term studies of the growth of students. This is an area in which research has long been needed, and in which little has been done. But a research attitude and continuous development of research procedures within the school pattern should make it possible to formulate developmental studies of children in relation to the school patterns which they experience. The effectiveness of such studies in child development has been proved. The need for these studies in education is apparent.

## Developing Patterns of Cooperation

It is apparent from the comments on the type of research which we may reasonably expect if teachers and others are to be involved that the individual school alone will not be a sufficient unit for this type of research. The individual school can develop research or study patterns in relation to its own program. It can develop longitudinal studies. It can provide clerical assistance and research time for teachers. But concern with the larger generalizations which will be of value to other schools and with the sharing of information from school to school would seem to indicate a necessity for enlisting the assistance and support of organizations other than schools and school systems.

The developing pattern of research at the present time stresses cooperative research in which members of state departments, professional organizations or university staffs cooperate with the local school in planning and carrying out research studies. The degree of involvement of teachers and others from the local school varies considerably. It is fairly safe to say, however, that the effectiveness of the research in the local school depends upon that degree of involvement. The employment of a research coordinator in ASCD is evidence of the belief of members of that organization in the value of stimulating research efforts in the local situation and offering help and consultation as well as assistance in sharing results of research.

Four patterns of cooperation with college research agencies are currently being developed:

1. The research worker asks the

teacher to gather data which will be used in arriving at a generalization on a problem which the research worker has identified as important. The degree of involvement is slight. The identification of the teacher with the project depends upon the kind of continuous communication established while the project is under way and upon the extent to which the teacher feels the problem is important to him.

2. The research worker cooperates with the teachers of a particular school to improve the program which that school carries on. The concerns of the teacher and the research worker are not the same. The teacher is working on methods or content of curriculum. The research worker is examining ways of working or is introducing interviews and questionnaires which carry the work of the school over into the field of generalization. Each helps the other and is interested in what the other is doing, but the purposes are recognizably different.

3. The research worker and the teachers of the particular school work together until a problem develops which they can identify and study. They are all concerned with the same problem and the research procedures which develop are developed in cooperation. The end result of the project is the solution of the problem studied rather than the generalization which it offers. Any generalization comes from the number of similar problems with which the research worker may be identified in various schools.

4. The research worker and the school agree to work together on a problem which has already been identified. They develop the procedures and the techniques for the study of the problem, and the entire staff of the school is involved in carrying out the study of that particular school program in relation to the identified problem.

In practice, the patterns in three and four can be related. A problem is developed according to the pattern described in item three, and then other schools are invited to participate in the study, using the techniques and procedures which were cooperatively developed in the first school. The Illinois Secondary School Study is using this pattern.

In summary, it is worthy to note that there is at the present time a general upsurge of interest and concern for educational research. Any improvement in our school program, whether it deals with content or with method depends in large measure upon the individual teacher and his working relationships with parents and students and other teachers. If school programs are to be changed, the changes will be made by teachers. And only if the teacher examines existing practice and examines his own attitudes and behaviors in the situation will he make changes. A pattern of educational research, therefore, which involves teachers themselves would seem to be essential if we are to effect improvement in our schools.

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