

New Tools for New Needs

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Too often in educational research the problems have tended to be subordinated to available techniques. This article discusses the experimental development of new tools for studying both old and new problems.

CURRICULUM development seems to have reached the stage where a fresh look at curriculum research is needed. Knowledge about what learning is needed, how it occurs, what factors affect it, and which organization of it is most effective is not keeping pace with new forms and emphases. Viewpoints regarding effective curriculum have held sway for a long time, while few tools have been developed to either apply them with scientific vigor or to test their efficacy under practical conditions. Both diagnosis and evaluation have lagged far behind the conception of new goals and the introduction of new materials and methods. Debate and argumentation rather than scientific proof have too often characterized educational controversies.

One illustration of such a lag between theoretical conceptions and practical scientific knowledge is application of the concept of needs. For some time now the curriculum development has been directed by the idea that its essential function is to serve the needs of the society and of the children. This principle, articulated by the Eight Year Study and popularized by countless publications since that time, is now practically a credo of curriculum planning. It appears in the prefaces of courses of study and rolls off the

tongues of speakers and writers on curriculum. One would expect, therefore, each curriculum innovation to be preceded by a careful study of the needs of students and of their communities and by a careful weighing of social realities. This, however, is not the case. What one finds is a reiteration of the general classification of needs of youth and of the problems facing the society.

Concrete studies of particular groups of children in particular settings are few and far between. Even the tools for diagnosing needs are relatively undeveloped. There is little dependable knowledge about how the general basic needs manifest themselves under particular conditions. There is as yet no methodology of converting knowledge about children or communities into curriculum plans. As a consequence many sins are committed in the name of this very pertinent and very useful principle of curriculum development.

Further, recent studies of culture and social class have revealed immense diversities in motivation, values and behavior according to cultural backgrounds. A whole new body of knowledge has emerged on social learning and its effect on school learning. These studies suggest a new complex of individual and social needs, and shed an entirely new light on processes

of learning. Yet little is known about the specific impact of diverse cultural backgrounds on learning in school, or about the relationship between the social needs and the developmental levels of children.

To take another example, objectives are usually grouped under four headings—information, attitudes, thinking and skills. However, neither the diagnostic devices nor evaluation pay much attention to attitudes or thinking, and knowledge about the educational experiences which are needed for effective development of either is relatively sparse. By and large, these aspects of growth, important as they are believed to be, are treated as intangible by-products. Therefore their development is only hoped for, but not planned for, as if thinking and attitudes could emerge by guess and by gosh.

A thoughtful consideration of methods of curriculum planning leaves one with an uncomfortable feeling that there are far too many areas in curriculum development which are guided by wishful thinking rather than by tested knowledge and conscious planning. Where is the trouble? Why do we know so little about so much that is important?

Perhaps one difficulty lies in the fact that in educational research on all levels the problems tend to be subordinated to available techniques rather than in reverse: examining crucial problems and then working on means for examining them. Schools diagnose only those needs and appraise only that kind of growth for which there are handy techniques. This tends to narrow the vision of problems to study and to divert the attention both of research-

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ers and practitioners from problems that curriculum makers on all levels need to understand and from making an effort to gather evidence needed to get new insights. Combined with the emphasis of traditional research upon precision and objectivity, this tendency has discouraged an effort to evolve tools for studying more complex and "intangible" aspects of educational process.

Failure to include practitioners, especially teachers, in the processes of defining problems and gathering evidence seems to be another source of our difficulties. While curriculum development has been increasingly in the hands of teachers, by and large their "expertise" has not been tapped correspondingly in searching for problems to study, or in devising ways for extending practical knowledge about these problems. This condition has naturally widened the gap between practice and scientific knowledge.

Experimentation with new materials and methods continues in a fumbling fashion, without developing an adequate theory to guide it or without accumulating adequate knowledge to sustain it.

Finally, while educational concerns have widened to make it almost imperative to draw from a wide array of social sciences, provision is rather inadequate for translating the findings in these fields into ideas useful in education or for adapting their study techniques for use in educational diagnosis and study.

Areas of Need

It is evident that there is great need for new tools for studying both old and new problems, and the remainder of the article is devoted to a description of some experimental developments in new tools to meet new needs.

- *Diagnosing interpersonal relations.* Interpersonal relations in the classroom have an important bearing on curriculum and teaching. Diagnosis of the structure of these relationships and of the dynamics and values which control them seem to hold important clues on such matters as how belonging is related to motivation and achievement. With an increasing emphasis on group work and group processes in teaching, the knowledge of the dynamics of roles individuals play in groups and of the effect of those roles on classroom atmosphere and productivity acquires importance. We need to know how to build cohesiveness and how to assess and develop leadership roles. Evidence is available, furthermore, that skills in human relations and in management of groups are not only fanciful additions to educational goals but important ingredients in all learning.

Sociometric tests and related studies show a great deal of promise in providing necessary facts in this area. (1) Currently the sociometric tests are used largely for a superficial diagnosis of acceptance and rejection of individuals. But with appropriate analysis and interpretation these techniques could become a significant source of information for assessing a variety of important conditions for effective learning such as group cohesiveness, methods of involving individuals, concentration and dispersion of leadership and blocks

to communication. It is not too far fetched to think that repeated use of these devices will yield evaluation of growth in these respects. Teachers who have experimented with their use have found these procedures useful in more adequate grouping of students, in enhancing self-discipline and in vastly increasing motivation and success in academic learning. (2)

- *Socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.* Socio-economic status makes a vast difference in the behavior, values and meanings students bring to school. Both current studies of class and culture and common sense observations support this. The differences in values, concerns and conduct created by differences in socio-economic status or by ethnic and racial backgrounds are admittedly creating a distance between school curriculum and the social learning. Repeatedly it has been pointed out that the school curriculum fails to touch a large proportion of pupils because the selection of materials and of motivating devices fail to meet their life realities. (3) Many difficulties with discipline problems which abound in schools in lower economic class neighborhoods are traceable to failure to understand the culture and class conditioned behavior and motivation.

Clearly, among the requirements for "background" knowledge about students is a greater familiarity with the various styles of life practiced in American communities. A number of schools faced with this problem have experimented with ways and means of getting evidence on this aspect of "home background." In one school system, interested in developing a curriculum emphasis on character development,

information was gathered on parental occupations, and Warners scale of rating occupations was applied to get a rough idea of the distribution of socioeconomic status in their school neighborhoods. (4) This information, combined with general ideas about the values, behavior standards and aspirations typical of the different socio-economic class levels provided preliminary information about the concerns and problems that each school needed to be aware of in its curriculum development. Other schools have used carefully sampled community informants to gauge the spread of life styles. In still others, diaries were assigned in which students for several sample days described in detail what they did, with whom they did it, and how they felt about it. This information was used to assess the conspicuous gaps in social learning and to get insights into contrasting social and emotional contexts in which students acquired a considerable portion of the wisdom, feelings and skills they had. (1, 2)

• *Attitudes, feelings and meanings.* A large part of curriculum has to do with matters that are either directly concerned with the maturation of attitudes and feelings, or which involve emotionally colored meanings. There is further evidence that feelings and attitudes color interpretation and use of facts and ideas and often block their communication and the processes of mastering them. A realization has grown also that in many areas it is impossible to achieve clear thinking without learning to treat feelings as facts. Traditional attitude tests are practically worthless for giving useful insights into the role of attitudes and feelings in un-

derstanding and thinking. Adaptation of the projective devices so widely used in psychological diagnosis seems to hold a greater promise for increasing the awareness of these factors in learning. Adaptations of projective devices to group use are incorporated in sociodrama, open-ended themes, open-ended story discussions and incident discussions which are being used experimentally in many schools. (1, 6)

All these devices represent spontaneous responses to relatively unstructured stimuli, and usually deal with content in which feelings are important. The way in which these devices can give clues to unsuspected gaps in curriculum and teaching is illustrated by an experiment of one second grade teacher who was trying out ways of diagnosing the ability of her pupils to sense the consequences of their misbehaviors. She selected some typical classroom incidents and asked her children to suggest what consequences these incidents entailed. The children did not have any difficulty in lining up what they should do or refrain from doing. But to her surprise their statements of consequences were entirely confined to punishments. "If you disturb someone, you have to sit out a game." None of the children showed a trace of an awareness of reality consequences of their behavior. It was obvious that both their home and school experiences had fallen short in developing the ability to apprehend the consequences of one's conduct, which ability is among the requirements for the capacity to make moral judgments.

In another school a theme on "What makes me mad and what I do about it" was given to a sample of sixth and

eleventh graders in an effort to diagnose their skills to solve interpersonal conflicts. A tabulation of responses by types of situations encountered and by techniques used revealed that while the specific situations creating conflicts shifted with age, there was little growth in understanding these conflicts or in techniques of dealing with them. Both age groups either retaliated when they could, withdrew helplessly while boiling inside when open retaliation was impossible, or devised ways of getting even. Neither group made any attempt to identify the factors leading to these conflicts or to assess the feelings created by them. The "need" revealed in this case was for developing a greater insight into the nature of interpersonal conflicts, a greater sensitivity to the role of feelings in them and a greater skill for solving these conflicts democratically.

By an adroit selection of problems and situations used for role playing, free discussions or themes, it is possible to accumulate fairly systematically evidence which is useful not only in determining what to teach in particular cases but also how to go about it.

• *Limitations and assets.* To be sure, these tools yield less exact information than do the usual research tools. While the data of most of these techniques can be quantified by coding the answers into appropriate classifications, there are limits to which these quantifications can be made either precise or completely objective. But at the same time, they yield more systematic and insight-giving evidence on many problems which curriculum makers and teachers sorely need to understand. Again, while for the time being the

evidence from these devices is only accurate enough for diagnosis of group trends, it yields more insight into serious gaps in curriculum and teaching than much of the more accurately compounded information on individuals. Because these devices can be used simultaneously for instruction and for diagnosis, their use encourages participation of teachers in processes of analysis and interpretation. But the chief merit seems to lie in the fact that by reducing the role of statistical manipulation and by putting emphasis on grassroots interpretation they can stimulate cooperation between research technicians, curriculum specialists and classroom teachers.

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