

Curriculum Research

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Activities for cooperative curriculum research may take many forms. There is no one best plan of organization or design for the solution of all curriculum problems. Curriculum research carried out by teachers, administrators and others may be based on local problems. We hope that school groups over the country will examine a variety of research designs for solving their problems and for extending their school programs.

The project described below by members of the staff of the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation is an example of an institutional approach for encouraging cooperative curriculum research. Many other approaches are possible. ASCD will be interested in hearing of other approaches now being developed for solving local problems through cooperative research. Manuscripts describing such projects should be addressed to the editor of this column.

ROBERT S. FLEMING

A Continuing Conference To Stimulate Research

CURRICULUM workers continuously face two important questions: How can teachers be encouraged to create and try out new and promising practices? How can they be provided with resources that will enable them to test the effectiveness and worth of their instructional innovations? The answer to the second question implies a research approach to curriculum development. It suggests the importance of evaluating changes to determine whether or not hopes become realities.

The Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation is interested in finding ways of facilitating research as a basis for curriculum changes. Merely urging people to "take a research approach" to instructional improvement—getting better evidence to define the problem, deriving promising proposals for dealing with the problem from a rich background of research and experience, working out a careful procedure for getting the best proposals into action, and carefully evaluating the consequences—has barely dented professional

practice. The Institute is now trying an experiment to find better ways of improving the curriculum by the use of research methods. Through a series of training conferences two related ideas are being tested:

- 1) Status leaders who participate in a series of curriculum research conferences will themselves come to value and practice cooperative research procedures in curriculum improvement; and
- 2) These status leaders will acquire skills in working with teachers that will facilitate the latter's attempts to initiate changes and utilize research procedures in their own teaching situations.

We have arranged a series of ten monthly conferences with a small group of curriculum workers who want to increase their professional skills, attitudes and understandings. Conference participants include teams of from two to four status leaders from six New Jersey public school systems: Fair Lawn, Millburn Township, Rutherford, Tenafly, Wayne Township and West Orange. Four members of the Institute staff also

participate in these conferences. Two two-day meetings have already been held at Teachers College. Eight more are scheduled during this school year. The intent in planning two-day meetings once a month was to provide sufficient time for trying out practices between conferences. The total time span of 15 months between the first and the last conference should enable us to evaluate innovations over a relatively long period.

Since we are interested in testing a procedure which is intended to affect indirectly a larger number of teachers, participation is limited to persons with especial responsibility for instructional leadership—for example, curriculum coordinator, supervisor, principal, assistant principal, and grade-level chairman. Each of the teams was selected from individuals in a system who have a common project or area of responsibility for instructional improvement. The premise for this grouping is that significant changes are more likely to occur when individuals are able to share ideas and support each other in their home situation. The actual selection of the teams followed after a series of visits and conferences at each system.

The content for the conferences comes primarily from the participants' experiences and common problems. For example, one team is concentrating on improving a spelling program. The rest of the training group explores with these team members ways of getting data helpful in identifying and defining the spelling problem; suggests the kinds of sources likely to yield hunches for desirable changes; studies ways of making changes; contributes ideas regarding evaluation procedures and helps in the process of generalizing.

Throughout each conference the participants give continuing attention to the importance of good human relation-

ships and effective leadership if the cooperative research approach to curriculum improvement is to be successful.

The conference focuses its specific research activities on definite on-going projects in the particular school systems. Training during the conference provides help with better ways of identifying and dealing with instructional problems. Attempts are not made to provide "answers" to these problems. That is, instead of trying to draft a theoretically desirable spelling program, the group helps the team from a specific school with suggestions for program ideas, materials and techniques and provides opportunities to practice and develop skills needed to initiate proposed changes. It is up to the status leaders, then, to experiment with these procedures when they are back on their jobs.

The pattern for a conference day varies. Sessions allow time for total group activity, for individual teams to map out local implementation of training ideas and for inter-school participants to raise special topics of concern. The Friday night meetings have usually combined social-professional sessions—dinner followed by a discussion in the relaxed surroundings of one of the participants' homes.

Training activities such as these take place when appropriate:

- Developing and practicing techniques for identifying curriculum problems.
- Developing and adapting instruments for measuring the effectiveness of curricular practices.
- Practicing the interpretation of data.
- Raising the efficiency of group work by role playing and other methods which stress human relations skills.
- Fostering attitudes which welcome

a ceaseless influx of more and better data.

- Identifying ways of locating and utilizing materials and resources more completely.

The conference sessions operate as laboratories for research designed to improve the group ways of working. A continuing watch is maintained for better and more pertinent evidence about the effectiveness of conference procedures. Many of the conference techniques can be used at home by status leaders for teacher education purposes. This is reflected in the number of times participants identify some conference situation as being similar to those faced at home or point to a particular procedure as having appropriateness for them.

Each of the teams has committed itself to working in its own community between conferences so as to test in a field situation the various ideas and skills emerging from the training activities. The experience of gathering data during training itself provides a helpful kind of discipline. Much of the data which the teams gather on their local problems proves to be meaningful for the training sessions. The analysis of difficulties which they encounter in the on-going situation is part of the training.

To get perspective on the setting and background in which the teams are working, the Institute staff visits the schools occasionally. Such visits focus on specific problems raised in the conference in relation to ways of working.

The HMLI staff also has its "team problem." It is to develop or adapt evaluation techniques which will enable the group to measure the effectiveness of these training conferences in achieving the objectives stated earlier. Like other teams, the HMLI participants work between conferences analyzing

data and planning. From the two two-day conferences already held the HMLI staff arrived at these tentative conclusions:

- Time spent by the HMLI staff prior to the first conference visiting teams in their home situations created a spirit which increased productivity at the first two conferences.

- Repeated attention to the group procedures facilitated the work of the conferences.

- Reports and records of team activities provide the HMLI staff with ample information for evaluating the series of conferences.

- Participants evidence greater interest when they are engaged in skill practice sessions.

- All participants are interested in each team's problems and are helpful in working on these problems.

How may a school system profit from this kind of continuing conference? It is our hope that this training will result in three gains: better leadership in cooperative research approaches to solving curriculum problems; immediate help in meeting problems in curriculum change; and, over a long period, better instructional programs. The Institute, on its part, hopes to gain knowledge about effective curriculum research training procedures. Even more basic will be the discovery of whether this kind of training actually makes a significant difference in local efforts to change the curriculum. The long-range result, we hope, will be the increased reliance on research by teachers and curriculum workers in place of the widely practiced rule-of-thumb or subjective-judgment procedures.

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