Group Dynamics
in Curriculum Improvement

HERBERT A. THELEN

What are conditions which foster in-service growth on the part of teachers? Findings in the area of group dynamics can assist in designing a program for curriculum improvement.

THERE are a number of approaches to the improvement of curriculum. Each has a limited usefulness, and each is correct as far as it goes. Thus one approach assumes that a "professionally minded" teacher, with some administratively provided consultant help, will bring about improvements in his teaching. Here the emotional support and reward typically come from the consultant; the teacher bucks teaching standards within the school, and, when the consultant is no longer available for support, the "improvement" either regresses or simply terminates. A second approach to curriculum improvement is through "working committees" on the faculty. Assuming that these committees are freed to deal with significant instructional problems, then there are usually two consequences. The first is that the teachers stimulate one another and possibly move toward better practice. The second is that each committee prepares a report of recommendations which are usually accepted without commitment by the faculty, and then buried. A third approach to curriculum improvement is through "cooperation" with the community. To the extent that the cooperation centers about practical problems of work-experience, planting gardens, helping in settle-

ment houses, etc., it extends the range of experience for the students. To the extent that the teacher is creative and knowledgeable, this approach may contribute to education rather than to training only. To the extent that it provides a set of expectations from the "outside," there emerges a set of supportive forces which encourage new developments. A fourth approach is to send teachers to summer workshops to get "the word," and this leads to anything from a new direction maintained through the support of the "internalized" workshop group to all sorts of new problems of communication and of being out-of-step with the home group. A fifth approach is through studious application of a well-formulated method, such as those of curriculum makers. This provides a set of methodological concepts on which a school department can depend, but it gives little guidance at the most important point: namely, in deciding just what the objectives should be.

Each of these approaches recognizes some limited but important fact: that individual growth of teachers is re-

Herbert A. Thelen is associate professor of educational psychology, and is director of the Human Dynamics Laboratory, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

quired for origination of new and better curriculum ideas; that the individual teacher must be supported emotionally by other people during the creative act and also in maintaining his new practices; that consultative aid can be helpful; that demands from the community help to externalize problems and give them enough objectivity so that one knows how to make choices; that methods of thinking about curriculum are useful.

It is my purpose in this paper to elaborate on these and some other conditions "required" for school-wide curriculum improvement. I shall present the discussion as a development of a general plan which a school might adopt; but I do this primarily to illustrate the required conditions, not to advocate this particular plan. It is my belief that if one examines successful efforts to improve curriculum he will find the conditions I am about to identify, even though the implementing plan may not formally provide for them.[1]

Conditions for Curriculum Development

1. Improvement is the result of changes in practices by individual teachers. Of the possible changes a teacher might intellectually diagnose as desirable, he is actually psychologically "ready" to experiment only with certain ones. These are the ones which do not involve more risk or frustration than the teacher can tolerate; and they are also the ones for which the teacher can see how to rectify the situation in

case his experimentation turns out badly.

2. Because of the highly personal and creative involvement of the teacher, he needs the emotional support of a small group of associates. The group must be one in which he is free to verbalize his bright ideas, obtain criticism without feeling defensive, experiment with tentative notions, make demands for listening and reacting, and obtain help to make observations or plan materials needed for new activities. Such a group is essentially a psyche group or clique. Its members give it loyalty and protect each other from real or fancied attack.

3. These self-training cells or cliques must communicate ideas and recommendations for policy (both instructional and administrative) to each other and to the administration. This suggests that they must have the status of faculty working committees, and that there must be expectancy for reporting to the total group. For reporting to the total group to be appropriate, it is required that the total group have some over-all problems to be solved and that the individually guided work of the self-training groups results in some contributions useful to the solution of over-all school problems.

4. The over-all problems for the total faculty must be "externalized"; that is, they must be seen as demands from the "outside." The reason for this requirement is that if the "school problems" are formulated as intramural concerns only, then the formulation of the problems will be used as the means for forwarding the interests of one group against those of another, and de-

[1] For the remainder of this discussion I shall draw on *Groups At Work*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. July 1954.

cisions will be based on power rather than on objective assessment of conditions. This is typically the case with legislative processes. There is, however, one important difference between legislation and curriculum improvement: namely, that decisions for the latter purpose bind the teachers to take action, whereas legislation requires no personal-emotional commitments.

5. The requirement that problems for the total faculty be seen as demands from the outside means, practically, that the demands come from the "community." For the "community" to be in a position to make demands on the school means that the school and community must be associated in purposes accepted by both. And the condition under which this is possible is one of cooperation on joint problems. The problems on which community agencies, groups and individuals have interests which overlap those of the school are problems of training students to meet their needs. In other words, the legitimate overlap is in matters of youth welfare, work-experience, civic participation, social opportunities and the like.

Such cooperation is between selected single teachers or groups of teachers with agencies or individuals in the community. The demand on the faculty as a whole is for policy to guide this cooperation. Such policy, arising from a wide variety of working relations on a variety of needs of students for training, should be based on professional study of how the training experience is to be inaugurated, supervised and guided. This, then, is the first kind of "outside demand" or externalized problem to be solved by the faculty on the basis of relevant insights from the small teacher groups.

6. School-community training experience is directed at the immediate needs of children in their effort to live successfully in the community. Such training is not necessarily *educative* in the larger humanistic sense. This, then, poses a second kind of demand on the total faculty: to develop methods of teaching whereby the training experience is made educative. Roughly speaking, this is the usual definition of the job of in-service training, and our additional insistence on the community-based training activity is for the purpose of keeping the discussion of teaching methods "down to earth" and in line with objective reality conditions. In other words, the school-community operating relationship is needed to keep the school from simply floating off in its own little island culture that may have no relationship to "real" problems and that therefore may be unable to provide any objective criteria for testing competing ideas about teaching.

The kind of teaching problems which the faculty would be studying can be illustrated in the following manner. Suppose, during training to be consumers, the students work in stores, have a hand in purchasing materials for their clubs or science department, test materials and products, and the like. The *educational* problem, over and above such practical need-meeting training, is to build on this experience some understandings of such general matters as the ethics of waste; the relationships among design, function and beauty; the relationships

among labor, materials and management; the problems and significance of policies for distribution of goods and services; and the like. While only certain teachers would supervise any particular type of training experience, it is the responsibility of *all* teachers to illuminate the significances, values, social roles and societal problems involved in these practical matters.

7. While not directly a condition for in-service training, the preceding design leads logically to a further opportunity. It is this: through the teacher's experience in the community and through his discussion with the children of the meanings of their experiences to them, a variety of practical suggestions should emerge for the improvement of the lot of children in the community. That is, the teachers will be in an excellent position to form opinions of needed modifications in agency programs and other arrangements for children. In effect, the school can become an instrument for "feedback" to various agencies and groups

about problems and conditions of child welfare. It seems to me that this possibility should entitle the school as represented by selected teachers and principal to a place on the community council or other official family of community institutions. By such means, two-way communication with the community is established: (a) the teachers initiate requests for assistance by the community in setting up training experiences outside the school; and now (b) the teachers report back to the official agencies of the community facts and suggestions about aspects of child welfare relevant to community programs.

Thus this over-all design, originating in an analysis of conditions required for effective improvement of curriculum by a school, results in a rationale for the "community school."

"We arrive at three possible and complementary roles for the schools as institutions within the community: (a) collaborators with others in setting up and supervising training experi-

ences; (b) professional educators working among themselves to improve methods for simultaneous training and education of children; (c) consultants to the collaborating agencies on aspects of their functioning related to the welfare of students.

"The role of collaborator gives individual teachers their 'place' in the community. The 'professional educator' role gives the faculty group as a whole its 'place' among other groups in the community. And the consultative role, usually but not necessarily exercised through school officials as representatives of the school, gives the school as an institution its 'place' in the community."[2]

Translation of this design into effective operating procedure will require many decisions about how to organize the necessary roles, obtain sufficient and appropriate communication, plan agenda for faculty meetings, and the like. The following recommendations in this regard seem most important:

1. The small working groups should be formed through voluntary selection of faculty members by one another. There should be no effort to force people into the program. As it moves along, a group standard of participation will develop, and this will provide the only pressure. If such a standard does *not* develop, then the program is missing the boat, possibly through lack of emotional support by the principal, possibly through too small a rate of

[2] *Ibid.*, Chapter III.

reward by satisfaction in accomplishment.

2. The principal must be emotionally involved in the work. Probably he might serve best in the role of executive secretary to a faculty steering committee which plans agenda for the meetings of the total faculty. The principal's actions can be of great assistance in scheduling classes so that self-training committees can meet, occasional expert consultation is available, the teachers are put in touch with appropriate citizens or agencies—such activities will do more than any amount of talking to maintain the program. The principal may find, however, that he has to work out some conflicts between his role as executive secretary on the one hand and as administrator and public relations man on the other.

3. In appraising the program and its accomplishments, evaluative criteria must be applied not only to changes produced but also to the adequacy of the processes of working together. If the conditions of cooperation and competition are realistic and steadily improving, then the proper evaluation is that the accomplishment is adequate. But the effects of actual changes should also be studied to sharpen up goals, and diagnose needed skills. (A faculty workshop might help if such needs become apparent.) The problems of evaluation will be comparatively easy to solve as long as the school keeps close interactive contact with the community.

———•———