Curriculum Research

EVERYONE who reads this editorial would probably agree that there is only one good and sufficient justification for spending valuable time conducting curriculum research. The justification is that the research gives promise of improving the educative quality of what boys and girls do in school. What boys and girls do in school, or under the supervision of the school, is the curriculum.[1] In this sense curriculum research must be practical because making curricular decisions and engaging in curricular activities are practical matters.

Many different kinds of research conducted under many different kinds of circumstances may have beneficial effects upon curriculum practices. Some research may be conducted under carefully controlled conditions and other research conducted in the excitement and realism of the on-going school. Some research may be undertaken to contribute ultimately rather than immediately to the improvement of the learning activities of pupils. An illustration of this kind of investigation is one designed to better the group work methods of teachers and supervisors. Such a study can be thought of as curriculum research only if it results in improvement in the learning activities of boys and girls in school. Those of us who are especially concerned with cooperative curriculum development are apt to take it for granted that if teachers learn better how to work together, this will result in a better curriculum. We rarely subject this assumption to any test. This test, however, is important. To pass the test any research that is called curriculum research, no matter how well conducted or under what circumstances, should result in the improvement of the curriculum.

Judging curriculum research against the criterion of an improved curriculum is difficult. For this reason some of us who call ourselves curriculum investigators are tempted to judge our research as worthy if intriguing instructional problems are attacked or large numbers of pupils are studied or the design of our inquiry is creative or the statistical methods we employ to make inferences from our data are ingenious. While it is important to study intriguing and important problems and to use a sufficient number of subjects and superior experimental designs and advanced methods of statistical analysis, none of these practices can be used as a criterion to determine the ultimate value of curriculum research. This must be inferred from the improvements in the educative value of the activities in which boys and girls engage that are a consequence of the investigation.

Testing in Practice

In its relationship to practice, there is, it seems to me, a fundamental difference between curricular research and research in what many people call the pure sciences. An inquiry, for ex-

[1] Many people define the curriculum as all of the experiences pupils have under the supervision of the school. This definition leaves much to be desired because none of us has access to the experiences boys and girls are having. Experiences are exceedingly personal and private. All we school people can do is to try to exercise some influence upon the activities boys and girls engage in and hope that these activities constitute educative experiences.

ample, conducted by a biochemist to develop a virus deadly to the human organism might be excellent research even though the results are used in chemical warfare to kill millions of people. Curricular research is, however, more nearly analogous to medical research than it is to research related to bacteriological warfare. It would be a contradiction in terms to describe as medical research an inquiry that resulted in poorer health. Similarly, curricular research would seem to be correctly named only when it is undertaken with the express purpose of improving the curriculum.

It is not uncommon for some people engaged in curriculum research to imply that it is not their business to find out whether or not their inquiries result in better curricular practices. Their job, they say, is to get at the truth or come as close to it as they can. Someone else may or may not use this "truth" to improve the learning activities of pupils. That, however, is not the chief business of the investigator. He has enough to do just digging out the truth. That is a full time job.

While it is true that digging out the truth about the curriculum in the above sense is difficult, it seems to me that nobody knows whether or not what is dug out is the truth unless it is tested against the realities of an ongoing school program. Even the research that is designed primarily to make a contribution to curriculum theory (and very little research of this type is conducted) must pass the same ultimate test. As has been said, teaching school is a practical business. The development of the curriculum is a practical activity. A theory of teaching or a theory of curriculum development that does not stand up when tested in practice has some decided flaws as a theory.

Assuming that curriculum research is worth doing to the degree that it results in improvements in curricular practices this important question is implied: What methods of conducting research are most apt to result in improvements in practice? There probably is no single answer to this question. Improvements in practice, however, always mean that people have changed. One of the best ways to enable people to improve their curricular practices is to make it possible for them to study what they are doing, to experiment with ideas that seem to them to be more promising and to get evidence to find out if they actually are better. This suggests that the people who are forced to cope day by day with instructional or curriculum problems and who are expected to change their behavior if the curriculum improves had better be collaborators in the research that is undertaken to bring about curriculum improvement. To the degree that their involvement in this kind of inquiry is genuine and to the degree they discover the consequences of their own practices they are apt to be influenced by these consequences and behave in accordance with them.

This point of view toward curriculum research which argues that the practitioner should be a party to the research process is no panacea. Few people find it easy to use a research approach to improve their day by day activities. It seems to be much easier to conduct research intended to improve the day by day behavior of other people. This has been my experience in the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute projects in which I have been involved. We staff members try continuously to create a situation in which our coworkers will increase their skills at conducting research as a way to improve their curricular decisions. I find

it quite easy to urge others to do this research and I can make what I think are sage suggestions for improving the quality of their inquiries. But when it comes to using more scientific methods to improve my own behavior, I have great difficulty.

The use of the methods of science to improve human behavior, especially one's own behavior, has had a short history. Curriculum research has had a very short history. Relatively few decisions about instructional materials or methods are based upon scientific evidence. A number of the articles in this issue of *Educational Leadership,* however, suggest that interest in using research as a guide to action is increasing among school people.

—STEPHEN M. COREY, executive officer, Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City.

The Classroom Teacher and Action Research

PAUL CARTER, MARY HARDEN and DANIEL NESBITT

Intensive and widespread planning in a metropolitan area has resulted in initiation of action research projects in numerous local schools and school systems. This article describes the development and the accomplishments of this area-wide movement.

THIS is a telescopic account of how a cooperative action research project came to be, the difficulties encountered in getting it under way, the efforts required to keep it going, and the cautious advancement of some tentative generalizations about what has been learned thus far.

The decision to undertake a cooperative research study developed slowly out of several years of committee deliberation and conference activity involving, at times, up to one hundred fifty teachers and administrators.

Framework for cooperative endeavor in the Detroit area is an organization of school systems known as the Metropolitan Detroit Bureau of Cooperative School Studies.[1] The research project grew out of the activities of the Elementary School Improvement Committee[2] formed in 1949 under the auspices of the Bureau.

It is interesting to trace the evolution of the research project through the official minutes of committee activity. For instance, from the record of a meeting of the ESIC on June 12, 1951, it appears that much time and

[1] The Bureau was formally organized in 1946 with twenty-eight charter members. Currently it includes forty-seven public school systems located in a five county area. Also affiliated through membership are the School of Education, University of Michigan, the College of Education, Wayne University and Michigan State Normal College.

[2] Referred to, hereafter in this report, as the ESIC.