

Curriculum Research

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Significant Issues for Curriculum Research

THERE ARE several questions which must be answered at the outset in order to deal with significant curriculum research in relation to significant issues in today's schools. For instance, what does "significant" mean? What does "curriculum" mean? "Research"? For the purpose of this brief article, it is assumed that a piece of research is significant provided it suggests to the general practitioner *what* he might well be doing with children and youth in today's communities and schools. Suggestions regarding *how* and *why* to go about doing these things are considered important also. Finally, suggestions regarding *how to find out* "what" and "how" and "why" are considered of even greater and more central importance.

"Curriculum" means all the experiences children and youth have for their and society's good or ill which are associated directly or indirectly with the work of a given elementary or secondary school. It also includes the work of institutions of higher education in that they prepare individuals to become teachers.

"Research" means commitment to both the *discipline of verifiable data* and to the *discipline of basic value propositions* growing out of an exam-

ination of the role of education in a democracy committed to maximum community and individual development. Its purpose is to *improve* education, not to stifle its further development. Problems are not solved by facts alone; rather they are solved with facts *and values*. The boldness of hypotheses is likely more a function of values than of facts. Research also means the systematic use of the experience of other competent persons. Conceived of in this way "research" tends to reduce the loneliness associated with it and to guarantee that we "get there faster with the strength to stay there" before going on to newer and possibly bolder hypotheses. Strength in this context consists of adequate conviction, insight and know-how to develop and interpret a specific educational innovation.

So far as elementary and secondary education are concerned, more research¹ is needed on such aspects of the curriculum as the following:

"1. Responsibilities of schools and other educational agencies in bringing about social change.

"2. Development of broader, more meaningful and significant evaluation instruments and their application to curriculum problems.

"3. Relative effectiveness of different types of curriculum patterns.

¹ For the sake of brevity exact reference to sources is not made; they are listed in order of use at the end of the article.

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"4. The effect of administrative and supervisory policies on curriculum.

"5. The influence of maturation, growth and development of the child on the scope and sequence of the curriculum and on curriculum policies.

"6. Relative merits of various ways of organizing curriculum improvement programs.

"7. Different ways of having educational personnel, pupils, parents and other citizens participate in curriculum development.

"8. Relative helpfulness of different kinds of curriculum bulletins and courses of study.

"9. Studies of the needs and problems of society and their relation to the curriculum.

"10. Studies of the effect of environment, school progress and other factors on the learning and development of pupils.

"11. Investigations of the interests, needs and problems of individuals at different ages and stages of maturity, and how these should affect the curriculum.

"12. Relative effectiveness of different learning materials such as books and audio-visual material.

"13. Relative values of different kinds of curriculum content and activities in promoting desirable growth of pupils.

"14. Ways of using the environment as a curriculum resource, in which pupils work on problems which are meaningful and significant to them."

In reference to preparation of teachers, the following statements point to areas of needed research:

"1. Research on teacher-education curriculums is still naive. It is often of the fact-finding-survey type. Designs for the research are often crude and give biased results. Experimentation is at a minimum.

"2. A curriculum which will equip teachers to perform a professional function is in the process of evolving but has not yet evolved."

Specifically with reference to factors influencing curriculum development in elementary and secondary schools, responsible inquiry produces the following questions:

"Is the rate of curriculum change increased by world, national, and community crises? Does public criticism of the public schools hinder curriculum improvement? Do the activities of congressional investigating committees decrease curriculum change? Which pressure groups have been effective in securing curriculum change? Does increased heterogeneity in a community stimulate curriculum change? Has the increased mobility of the population resulted in a more uniform curriculum? Has the increase in the number of homes in which both parents work produced an expansion of the curriculum? Has television changed the content of the curriculum? Is curriculum improvement associated primarily with increased financial support of the schools?

"Does money spent by a foundation to encourage special types of curriculum improvement produce any lasting change in local school systems? Do publishing companies speed or retard curriculum improvement? Do citizens' committees facilitate or impede curriculum improvement? Do association yearbooks or statements of national commissions stimulate curriculum change? Do state or systemwide curriculum bulletins produce improvement in the curriculum? Which types of inservice activities develop readiness for curriculum change? Are certain types of educational leadership more effective than others in promoting curriculum change? Do research activities result in curriculum improvement? Do published reports of research studies stimulate curriculum

change? Are certain types of curriculum structure more responsive to societal changes than are other types?"

A further look at the literature of educational research suggests that:

"Another frontier on which more research is needed is cooperative planning with the community. Although the committee has dealt with the educational program for adolescents as a school problem, it is a total community responsibility and function. Two unanswered issues are:

"1. How can a school bring the community into effective participation in curriculum planning?

"2. What types of cooperation with community-youth organizations result in a better educational program for adolescents?

"Both validating and exploratory research are needed. The studies presented in this area provide some hypotheses which we can accept without much doubt. These should be validated in many high schools throughout the United States by action-research projects."

In the midst of pressures, issues, and notions of needed research, one wonders what all the foregoing means. Apparently, the practitioner is not systematically using the experiences of others in tackling the improvement of his work. Further, it appears that he does not know too well how to do real cooperative action research. The answer is an obvious one: *time* is needed so that more of it can be done in accordance with such generalizations as the following:

"1. Those who finally are to make research findings operational in community and school behavior and those who support the educational process in a given community must participate right from

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the start in the research plan beginning with problem identification and definition.

"2. Research must result in better community and school practices, improved behavior, and positive action. Appropriate specific questions here are: Did the facts discovered lead to action? To what degree did the methods and findings actually lead to improved practice? Are we now using ways of working which are more successful than ones earlier used? Does the new way of doing things really work? Are the persons responsible for action decisions now able to make these decisions more adequately and surely? Are we better off than before?"

We also need to pay more attention to factors affecting the way in which we go about improving education.

"We are going to be forced to do a good deal of basic research in the whole field of social change, public policy regarding education, and the function of education in a society."

There is need to re-examine the role of the school in community development. In bold outline the thesis of a recent volume is three-fold:

"Strong local communities have unique contributions to make to the achievement of American purposes.

"In the process of building strong local community life citizens should become and remain self-reliant, inventive, and independent individuals, self-protected against the stifling encroachment of statism and deadening conformity.

"The local community's schools both can and should become potent channels used by the people to strengthen local community life."

The position taken in this article is that what is worked upon, how it is studied, what innovations are intro-

duced into the life of a specific community or school, how they further are evaluated, and what new problems are identified—all are the profitable business of the practitioner, the lay public, and the experienced educational and social-science researcher. Generally speaking, education has not taken time to involve all of these groups at the local district and school building levels so that truly cooperative action research is gotten under way which properly takes into account both local autonomy and the general findings of fundamental research. There are, of course, some outstanding illustrations of such activity in this country; they are both too few in number and too little known by educational practitioners in general.

Finally, at the higher educational level, this article must at least mention the specific problem of the shortage of qualified teachers.

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