A County Staff Experiments with Action Research for Curriculum Improvement

For four years (1948-1952) the Yolo County staff strove hard to improve the quality of the in-service training. Staff members planned extension courses, institutes, demonstrations, visits. They used qualified specialists. They involved teachers and administrators in planning and in evaluation. These activities produced gains in the form of improved materials and their greater use and in good will toward the county office. But the county staff was not satisfied with this and still had many questions.

How could they get better communication so teachers and administrators would be freer to express their real concerns? (The discussions seemed of surface quality and did not reach into the heart of day-to-day problems.)

Why weren't the gains more permanent? Why did teachers not continue to work on their own problems? Had their in-service program only served to motivate low-level conformity and high-level imitation? Was theirs only a pump-handle supervision, which failed to translate itself into a working dynamic and which gave teachers no real skills to direct their own growth and develop their own procedures?

These questions prompted an informal survey of in-service needs through a series of informal area meetings, since questionnaires seemed ineffective in yielding realistic information as to where the shoe really pinched. These meetings revealed several specific kinds of concern. Help was requested in grouping children, in intergroup problems, in classroom management, discipline, in teaching reading. Administrators wanted help in handling faculty meetings, in planning curriculum with teachers and pupils, and in dealing with school-community relations. But, more important, these meetings also helped the county staff to analyze the causes for a lack of frank and honest communication between teachers, administrators and the county staff. It was evident that in spite of all efforts toward democracy a feeling existed that there was a line-of-command hierarchy starting at the “top” with the state department of education and extending through the county staff to the school districts. This feeling stymied communication, whenever administrators, teachers, and county staff people got together. Even though there was “group talk” in faculty and administrative planning sessions, the talk remained too polite and superficial to produce results. School people also regarded one another in terms of status, and of their level of operation, rather than in terms of a role.
These concepts set the responsibility for initiating anything on the shoulders of the county staff and of the administrators. Teachers acted as passive recipients or as passive resisters as the case might be.

There seemed also to be a lack of communication skills, especially in procedures that created trust, security and involvement. This suggested a need of improving human relations techniques and group skills.

**Individual Action Projects**

The in-service program was revised to meet these weaknesses. Instead of persuading as many teachers as possible to attend lectures and demonstrations, a problem-centered workshop was established, in which anyone with a genuine concern was invited to study his own classroom problems and to experiment with ways of solving them. Instead of demonstrating new materials and techniques to many who were essentially unwilling to change, 27 teachers who volunteered for the first workshop engaged in individual action projects and were helped to learn whatever techniques were essential to them. Group meetings were devoted to sharing common points of analysis or results which were useful to all, and to developing realistic hypotheses regarding action plans for solving individual problems. Group study was thus reserved only for those aspects which had utility to all, while a large part of the work was carried on in individual conferences with the consultant and the members of the county staff.

At the same time twenty administrators met for a half day each month. These meetings began with the task of selecting volunteers and proceeded from there to the projection of ways of working with the staff on various problems suggested by those attending. The main focus was on understanding the processes used in the workshop so that the administrators could implement the projects undertaken in their schools as well as on learning the ways of working with their own staffs and communities.

Dr. Hilda Taba of the education staff of San Francisco State College, was retained as a consultant to work in the teacher and administrative workshops and with the county staff in planning and implementing workshop projects.

Practically all of the first year was devoted to learning certain rudimentary research skills for diagnosing needs and problems and to learning skills in
working together. Those who worked on problems of grouping needed to acquire techniques of diagnosing the existing social structure in their classrooms. Those who had difficulties with slow readers needed to develop more precise methods of locating causes for slow reading and some methods of stepping up techniques of remedial help which did not necessitate isolating the slow learners. Many learned to use such devices as open-ended discussion of cut off stories, or analysis of behavior incidents, in order to learn more about the attitudes and perceptions of children and to focus more effectively on attitude development.

The results? While during this first year the actual classroom results were not too spectacular, a marked change took place in teacher attitudes and in their capacity and willingness to face their teaching problems. “Problem” was no longer a scareword, to be avoided in group meetings. Both teachers and administrators grew in their ability to help each other establish procedures for analyzing and solving them. Levels of involvement and functional roles were also clarified. County personnel no longer needed to shoulder the entire responsibility for growth and change. As teacher initiated projects got under way, they were eagerly sought as resource personnel in techniques, in skills or on materials. There was constant evaluation of weaknesses and a search for improved methods in ways of working together. Communication became comfortable and a two-way track was established: local schools were able to state their needs more clearly and the county staff was able to offer more pointed help and materials.

Wider Participation

On the basis of this rather slow and careful start it was possible to establish a more vigorous program for this, the second, year.

1. Because the previous year’s workshop brought together individual teachers from many schools, these individual efforts often were made with little or no support from the rest of the school staff. The mutual reinforcement gained when teachers work together on a local school problem, and the net gains in school curriculum resulting from that reinforcement, were often lacking.

To remedy this weakness and to enhance schoolwide participation five “cluster” workshops were established in local school districts initiated at the request of either the teachers or administrators in local schools. One of these workshops, composed of the entire staff of two elementary schools, started out establishing a more effective grouping and grade placement in primary reading, but soon also launched a replanning of the social studies program, the development of a program for a controlled evaluation of the results and a plan for educating parents to understand the change in program. Another workshop, composed of twelve secondary school teachers and administrators in a newly established high school, was concerned with intergroup problems within the school-community. A third, involving all teachers in a large elementary school district, invited the consultant and the county staff to redirect an already established in-service program into more research- and action-oriented channels. The emphasis here had been to bring teachers more directly into planning and steer-
ing their own in-service program so that it reflects their own purposes more accurately.

2. The administrators’ workshop decided to be self-directing. Instead of working on human relations programs it established five subcommittees to work on such administrative problems as ways of establishing special education classes, purchasing practices and procedures (always a headache in rural counties), promotion, retention and adjustment. These subcommittees are at work in fact finding, and expect to come out with recommendations to the county office.

3. The county staff, in addition to planning the workshops and helping its own individual members, has constituted itself into a work seminar on “ways of working.” At least once a month a whole day is devoted to analyzing its own working procedures, and to developing a clearcut theoretical framework of group processes as these apply to supervision. Each staff member also is responsible for a work group of his own, the problems of which are carefully described in these seminars so that the entire staff can participate as a team in diagnosing the difficulties, in planning the next steps to eliminate these, and in creating the necessary research hypotheses, skills and techniques. In order to assure realistic training in teamwork, the county staff has chosen for itself one in-service project as a team responsibility.

**Suggested Principles**

These experiences have suggested some operational principles which might be helpful to other counties with problems of in-service training.

- In-service programs yield more lasting results when a start is made from teachers’ problems and the training is focused on developing a research-oriented approach to these problems.
- Large scale arbitrary mass involvement of teachers and administrators is unrealistic and unmanageable. Greater participation is secured by starting with as few as happen to be concerned, and involvement is extended gradually as the activities coincide with new levels of interests and competencies.
- Active work in groups on research-oriented problem solving has transfer value: once the method is learned it can be applied to other problems regardless of content. As this is accomplished in one group, leadership is released to work with other new groups.
- Group-wise problem solving develops skills and insights which enable the participants to set the stage for democratic group action: it enables educators on various county levels to break down a feeling of autocratic hierarchy; teaches them to replace the concept of status and authority with the concept of role in working relationships; group interaction on work projects opens doors for meaningful communication.
- From the standpoint of supervisory technique it seems more effective to free a person’s intelligence through helping him realize his problem-solving potential as a group member than to continue an information-feeding, pump-handle kind of supervision which adds nothing to his self-reliance.

—Elizabeth Noel, director of curriculum, and Jack Marsh, secondary co-ordinator, Yolo County Schools, Woodland, California.