

Curriculum Research

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TO SPEAK FRANKLY, the expression "curriculum research" frightens many people. It does me too.

I hope I belong to the group of well intentioned, hard working, constructive people who are trying to help improve the educational experiences children have in school. Yet as I think of the things we do with teachers, principals and supervisors to improve educational programs it is hard to apply the expression curriculum research to these efforts. At the same time, however, we feel that we are doing more than just "tinkering."

I would like to think about one project we developed recently with the staff of the Fond du Lac public schools in the area of the language arts in order to see how research ideas might be incorporated into curriculum programs and what this experience might mean for other similar projects. It is not proposed, however, that this experience serve as a model for other programs.

Through the activities of the language arts committee, the staff of the Fond du Lac public schools became aware of some of its problems in the area of language arts. After examining these problems for one semester, Harold Bauer, superintendent; Ralph Cooke, curriculum coordinator; and Mary Jane Macdonald, chairman of the language arts committee met with the State Department of Public Instruction and the Department of Education

of the University during the summer to see if help could be provided for the following year. Charles E. Walden, curriculum coordinator for the State, and I, from the University, agreed to work with the Fond du Lac teachers. This work was done without fee and the University and State Department paid the travel expenses. The only stipulation we made was that we and the administrative personnel of the staff would want to work with the staff in identifying and carrying through the plans for work and that we would become working members of the group for the time duration (two years) of the project.

During these two years, four major activities were planned and carried out by the staff: (a) the study of the social studies program via an anecdotal record of actual classroom activities to see how the arts of language were functioning in a content area; (b) the examination and bringing together of present knowledge on usage conventions and skill factors in speaking, listening, writing and reading; (c) the development of instructional materials for children at the points of greatest need; and (d) the consideration and introduction of a form of staff organization which would promote curriculum study and development.

The Fond du Lac staff is probably like most groups of teachers and administrators — busy, hard working,

plagued with meetings and responsibilities, concerned in various degrees about their teaching, and including many people of real ability and vision. The usual array of expectations was held by the staff regarding the role of consultants, chairmen and working committees ranging from—"Why don't you tell us what to do?" to "Why don't you get out of our way?" to "We are trying to find out what common reading abilities run through the content fields at the high school level. How can we go about doing this?" A common general question was, "How will this help us in our teaching?"

As the above implies, a continuing area of concern in this project was that of people—their personal and professional roles, their patterns of interaction, and their increased competency to work with others and to make contributions to the problems of the language arts. No research in the sense of controlled systematic data gathering and analysis was developed. Frankly we did not have time. Much time, however, was spent in working with chairmen and groups in examining what happened in a given meeting, raising "could it be's" as to possible factors operating to explain behavior, planning what should be done in the next meeting, predicting what might happen if certain procedures were tried, keeping a record of the meeting, testing plans against what actually happened, and planning the next meeting in terms of these findings. It could be that we were still navigating by the seat of our pants but the above process of observation, study and analysis, predicting, trying out, more observation and study, etc., seemed to be an

important beginning in moving toward more formal research plans. In any case more people assumed leadership roles, more people seemed happier and concerned about the activities, a great deal of work was done, and some changes in staff relationships and in the language arts program took place.

A Developmental Program

There is not enough space to tell in detail of the experiences of having a staff keep an anecdotal record of the teaching-learning situation in their own classrooms and the problems which grew out of attempts to study and interpret such a record. The attempt to identify the situations in which speaking, listening, writing and reading functions were used in the lives of both adults and children was interesting particularly when we tried to relate these findings to usage and skill factors and to the problem of sequence of development. The development of instructional materials for children around the use topics of "We Talk Together," "We Discuss and Make Plans Together," "It's Fun To Write Letters," and "I Am an Author" forced us to put into practice many things we had talked about especially when each building group took one bulletin to develop with its children and to share the results of its work with other elementary school building groups. The School Board participated in the planning of these materials and published the complete booklets for the system. The initiation of a Coordinating and Planning Council to relate and support the over-all in-service and curriculum program of the school system involved much thinking

and discussion about the respective roles of the elementary and high school and the relationships of the central administration to on-going working curriculum committees and planning. Again, the willingness of the staff to experiment with a new staff unit in the administrative structure of the school is greatly to be admired. This experimentation was, however, more developmental in character than the careful evaluation of alternative organizational patterns. It was difficult to see how more extensive evaluation could have been carried on without having the staff throw the baby out with the wash.

This short review seems to suggest the following for curriculum research:

1. It is likely that most school staffs, no matter how concerned and experienced, are not able to jump directly into formal curriculum research.

2. Could it be that the first step in moving in the direction of more adequate curriculum research is the one of incorporating the broader meaning of the scientific method or the process of constructive critical thinking into the study activities of curriculum working groups? In the Fond du Lac project all four activities provided opportunities for the observation, study and analysis of the appropriate data, the consideration of possible differentiating factors behind the behavior and the prediction of what would probably happen if certain plans were carried out, the checking in actual experience of the results of such planning and the replanning of next steps in the light of this experience.

3. It seemed evident that this process would ultimately carry the group in certain areas of work such as the

development of booklets, the try-out of certain teaching procedures, the introduction of various kinds of language experience to more carefully planned and controlled study and research. On the other hand, it seemed fairly clear that the staff was not in the mood to care for this kind of carefully controlled study in the area of its own human relations and in the development of organizational units such as the Planning and Coordinating Council. Was the difference here one of the degree to which the individual persons became the object of research concern?

4. Curriculum research, if it is to attack the broad range of problems included in curriculum development, must be broadened to include historical, documentary and philosophical research methods as well as the experimental. The study and analysis of professional and instructional materials for answers to certain kinds of questions is just as important a research method as is the experimental testing of certain hypotheses about the modification of group behavior.

5. The role of the consultant in the encouragement and stimulation of the staff to go on to study their curriculum problems on some sort of long-time basis seems to be an important one. In Fond du Lac, the consultant was in a better position to suggest possibilities and to raise certain questions than many members of the staff and administrative group. On the other hand, it became very obvious that it was not his function to evaluate either the program or people.

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