

Action Research

As a Technique of SUPERVISION

By shifting to small group work, using outside consultants and developing sensitivity to possibilities for action research, a county school system replaces its customary in-service procedures with a vital and exciting curriculum development program involving all school personnel.

IF ACTION RESEARCH is to be used as a basis for curriculum improvement, it needs to be done by those who are to change the curriculum, namely, the teachers. This means also that the leadership roles of those who work with teachers need to be re-examined to assure adequate help, validity of research, and effectiveness of curriculum change.

This was the task undertaken by the Yolo County curriculum department, nearly two years ago. Somewhat discouraged by the lack of dynamics in their usual in-service procedures, they asked Miss Taba to work with them on a "grass-roots" approach in training teachers to modify their classroom level curriculum, by studying their problems, analyzing the factors which played on them, and experimenting with new instructional designs. Thus a voluntary program of

in-service education, centering on the problems and tasks of each participant and on leadership training of those who work with teachers—the county staff, the district administrators and principals—was set up.

The scheme idea was to establish voluntary working units of any size—individuals, small clusters, departmental groups, entire school staffs—provided they had a task on which to work, and enough interest to study the problem, to experiment and to record their procedures and findings. The county staff members agreed to attach themselves to these groups according to their usual working assignments, and to perform any roles that seemed necessary to keep the projects going, from supplying the needed materials and emotional support to keeping adequate process records of the training sessions. The consultant agreed to help with the analysis of these problems, the planning procedures and the research techniques until the county staff could take over.

Yolo is a small rural county, with only six supervisors under a curriculum

Hilda Taba is professor of education, San Francisco State College, San Francisco, California. Elizabeth Noel is director of curriculum, and Jack Marsh is secondary co-ordinator, Yolo County Schools, Woodland, California.

director. Many of the teachers are on provisional credentials, others qualified years ago by taking county examinations. Many more are "new to the job." Only within the past four years has there been a systematic effort at professional growth. The consultant thought, therefore, that the training procedures would be given a rigorous test.

What Can Teachers Work At?

Since it was agreed to start with any problems anyone wanted to work at, the work started with a great variety of projects, of which the following are examples.

1. *Remedial help for retarded readers and/or slow learners.* This required collecting data about what makes slow learners slow, devising experimental procedures to stimulate progress and trying these out in classrooms. Fifteen persons, including two high school teachers, are at work on this.

2. *Development of concepts.* Three primary teachers are experimenting with ways of focusing curriculum experiences on the development of ideas, such as how science and technology increase production, what interdependence in the community's work really means, or how our present way of life differs from Indian life. This required an examination of the levels of perception, a clear focusing of first-hand experiences on the central ideas to create new perceptions and a systematic emphasis on certain thought processes, such as contrasting and comparing to develop new ideas from these perceptions.

3. *Classroom control, grouping and*

group work. This required an analysis of such problems as dispersion of interest, attention span, and methods of creating initiative and work techniques for group work. Sociometric studies are under way to determine the social and psychological basis for grouping. Experiments are designed for ways to increase the effectiveness in group production, and for examining the effects of different patterns of grouping on self-discipline and learning.

4. *Reporting to parents.* About twenty teachers are involved in projects related to reporting. Some are assessing parent and teacher reactions to a revised report card. Others experiment with meeting parents in groups of ten or so, to both report and explain how learning takes place. Still others are exploring ways for interviewing parents in order to assess the emotional climate at home.

5. *Methods of identifying maladjusted children.* Several teachers are experimenting with a new test to identify potential maladjustment and emotional disturbance. Others are analyzing the "problem" behavior to get a more adequate notion of the factors which cause it, and hence also of methods to prevent it.

6. *Replanning the activities program.* Several staff members of a new high school in a rapidly growing community, in which students have many problems, tend to be disinterested in the usual academic work, and have little stake and little sense of belonging, are in search of a more meaningful activities program. The group is at work studying the socio-economic status pattern in the community and surveying student participation in the

current activity program for orientation into needed changes.

7. **Human relations.** This involves analysis of interpersonal cleavages and the study of sensitivity patterns and of the levels of understanding children bring to these problems. Various techniques for developing more adequate ideas, feelings and skills for human relations problems, such as the discussions of problem stories, incident analysis and open discussions are being explored as means for simultaneously enhancing understanding, extending sensitivity and developing more effective solutions.

How Does It Go?

What are the steps in the development of the action research under such conditions?

1. **Statement and analysis of the problems.** The first step is to get an adequate statement and analysis of the problems. Some sort of problem census is needed to make sure each individual works on something of concern to him, and on the problem as he sees it. However, since these perceptions tend to be of surface quality, activities are needed to analyze each problem, so as to discover its more fundamental dimensions and causes. Discussion in the form of questions from consultants and more precise descriptions by participants serves this end only partly. Preliminary data gathering is needed in addition to reveal to everyone concerned more fundamental aspects. For example, the persons concerned with the slow learner needed to list specific behaviors of slow learners in operational terms, to make case studies of individuals, to check on mental abil-

ity, reading scores, the other records, and to examine the reactions of their students to a variety of situations in order to develop a more discriminating idea of what makes slow learners slow.

2. **Formulation of tentative hypotheses.** This preliminary data gathering accomplishes several things: (a) It helps teachers change their minds about what their problem really is (e.g., many slow learners were not slow at all—their malfunctioning was for a great variety of reasons). (b) It forms a more objective basis for formulating hypotheses as to factors and causes that really seem to operate in the problem as perceived by teachers. (c) It provides the preliminary diagnostic material around which to discuss the relevant ideas, principles and data to enhance the professional perception. (d) It provides the psychological climate in which new ideas, otherwise resisted, can be made acceptable through self-learning rather than through preaching. (e) It focuses further research techniques so that each one is addressed to the precise aspect that needs to be explored.

3. **Focused research.** Isolation of crucial factors in the problem permits the "cutting down" of the problem to a manageable size and the concentration of analysis and fact finding along these narrowed paths. For example, the preliminary analysis of slow learners suggested that some were just slow, others emotionally blocked, still others victims of bad habits. Data secured in this focused research provide a further diagnosis and basis for action.

4. **Formulation of experimental courses of action and testing for their effectiveness.** Naturally, when a phe-

nomenon like slow learning is broken down to its variegated causes, action can be focused more precisely to overcome the particular difficulty. For example, one third grade teacher undertook to work on her twelve slow learners. A search of the school records, information volunteered by students, other teachers and the principal revealed these students to be above average in ability, from fairly stable homes, doing fairly well in all things not depending on reading. None was too disturbed or aggressive. A reading achievement test revealed retardation of one or two years, with special difficulty in word meaning. Observation at reading revealed a lack of meaning for words, failure to use context and picture clues, overdependence on word analysis and little interest in *what* was being read. Tension and nervousness accompanied their efforts to read.

The best hunches or action hypotheses seemed to be: That the reading of this group will improve with more concrete experiences to build up meanings, (a) if a common experience is used to provide a background for the development of meanings, (b) if reference points other than sounds of letters are used for attacking new words, and (c) if an oral experience precedes the effort to read. The film booklet and filmstrip set on the "Gray Squirrel" produced by Encyclopedia Britannica Films and Paul Witty was selected for the first trial. The consultant helped work out a procedure: The pupils were tested on words appearing in the sequence. Forty-eight words were unknown. The film was shown to the entire class, after a short introduction to create interest. Care-

fully prepared questions were used to discuss the film. The twelve slow learners then read the booklet. They first talked about the picture taken from the film, using the words appearing in the text, then attempted to find in the text the words and phrases they had used. The pupils then read the sentences, and finally one student read the entire page which contained ten previously unknown words. Only one page was tried the first day. This procedure continued until students were able to read 3-4 pages in a sitting. Whenever any difficulties appeared, the film was reshown. Then the film strip was shown to the entire class, in connection with which the slow learners read to the class the parts the teacher was sure they could read well. Next a test is going to be given again to see vocabulary gain, and at a later date to check retention. There was no question about motivation. It was difficult to stop the reading periods. Even the shyest and the slowest volunteered. Everyone wanted to take the books home to read to his parents.

A careful record of procedures, of classroom results and of evaluation data is kept both for needed future modification and for later write-up to share with other teachers.

Roles in the Process

The county staff members set themselves a task to help the consultant by recording the sessions, by working with the teachers in the interim. While doing this they familiarized themselves with the diagnostic and research techniques that were being used, with the diagnosis of teacher readiness in deciding what they could do next, and

the psychological principles of learning steps and sequences so that each step led to the next one without strain or pressure. As the projects matured and the staff gained skill, leadership was increasingly transferred to them. For example, each county staff member carried independent projects during the second year using the consultant only as an advisor to them.

During the first year the consultant was the initiator of projects, guiding all the first steps, and responsible for the continuity of the tasks and the sequence of the research steps. She was also the research technician, devising and adapting research tools for each project. The consultant also conducted the "post mortem" staff clinics on whys and wherefores of the procedures used, and training sessions on certain more complicated diagnostic and action-research instruments and procedures, and on interpretation of the data and of findings.

The administrators, as a total group, took part in a few sessions exploring the procedures used so that they could offer more effective local support and gain insights into ways of working they might apply in their own roles. District administrators were initiated into leadership roles, guiding their own teachers.

Some General Results

1. There is evidence that leadership is forming and spreading. Those who were beginning to learn democratic ways five years ago, now have the technical competence to make this method work. The county and district staff are adapting increasingly effective and independent ways of working with groups. They have learned to assess

their ways of working for their human relations consequences, to use diagnostic techniques as a first step in curriculum change, to ask questions instead of supplying answers. They have also learned not to be disturbed at plunging into enterprises, the end products of which are not clearly seen. As they see the research approach work like magic in the workshop groups, they are applying the same approach in their other working relations. The administrators, at first even reluctant to talk problems in a "formal" group, suspicious of county dictation, now are a free-wheeling action group under their own leadership, devising procedures for screening the retarded pupils, establishing salary schedules, formulating strategies for dealing with the county board of supervisors. Several who seemed rigid and autocratic gained a new democratic hue as they became skilled in more objective and dynamic leadership techniques.

2. Lines of communication have become clearer and easier. Fewer individuals ask about authority roles, more are concerned with "who can do what" irrespective of their positions in the hierarchy of authority. Blocking lines between the county staff, the district administrators and the teachers are fast disappearing and ideas and suggestions flow back and forth uninhibited and with less threat to individuals. Hence, persons who formerly were afraid of workshop procedures or resistant to them, and, as a consequence, kept clear of "messing with curriculum," are now wholeheartedly in the middle of it, free to own up to some problems, secure that it is experimentation and trying that count, and *not* be-

ing right before one attempts anything.

3. Teachers who had to be roped into institutes and meetings ask for more meetings, know when they need resource help and ask for it, and, furthermore, seem to enjoy the whole thing.

4. Curriculum projects shaping up toward the end of the second year show far greater maturity, insight and creativeness than anything that was produced before. And action accomplished on one level leads to further action, as self-discovery and learning-by-doing open up new vistas. So far, nobody seems to have arrived at a dead end, and everyone is making plans for further things to do.

5. The number of persons at work has steadily increased. Having started last fall with 13 in a workshop of all teachers, now 26 administrators and 46 teachers are involved in some project, either research for action or experimental action. There is a possibility that the year will end with a number of rough drafts on the areas of problems outlined in the beginning of this article.

Practical Consideration

Usually several questions are asked

about ventures of this sort. Is the financial burden too great in shifting to small group work from mass meetings and in using outside consultants? Can teachers of all levels of training and experience make this approach a success? Can this approach help teachers, supervisors, administrators find a *new way of working*? The experience in Yolo shows that financial burden need not be great, if the new processes are not added to the old but replace them in part. On the outside, the county spent only \$1500 more than it had on its customary in-service procedures. This has paid off in higher morale, in improved teaching and in added leadership. While some teachers showed more insight and enterprise than others, all were productive in new skills, better teaching and materials.

Current evaluation of the program by all involved points to an improvement in cooperative working skills. The products, thus far, are spelled out in the first steps toward improved curriculum, an increase in group leadership techniques, and a general consensus that in-service teaching the action-research way allows educators to "free their intelligences" in seeking better ways to teach children.



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