

Changing the *Language Arts Program* In a Large City System

Can the administration of a large city school system effectively initiate a distinct change in emphasis in a content area in all classrooms? Can good human relations and feelings of status be fostered and improved during such a program of change?

MANY EDUCATIONAL CIRCLES seem to believe that curriculum change or instructional improvement in a large city school system is a slow and frustrating process. Studies have been written to show that there is a lag of thirty years or more between the acceptance of an idea and its actual incorporation into the educational program.

The fact that such a lag has existed in the past does not mean that it necessarily should continue. In a large system the supervisory and the administrative set-up sometimes seems to have a retarding effect on change. However, once the change is effected, the resulting benefits to a proportionately larger number of boys and girls justify the expenditure of extra time and effort. Too often discussion of curriculum change in large systems has been like discussion of the weather. Everybody talks about it, but nobody does anything about it. Yet this writer has seen few well planned and carefully worked out projects for instructional improvement meet with failure in his particular school system.

The technique for effecting change

is the same in most school organizations, large or small, although the machinery may be more complicated. The important guide and key to success is to remember and to act upon de Huszar's admonishment, "Persons who have been consulted will have a different attitude than if they had been ignored."¹ The people responsible for making a change must be included in the planning. In a small city system this may involve only the superintendent and the principal, or perhaps, just the principal and the teacher. Some systems have a coordinator who would also participate. Discussion is easy, and decisions are quickly made with such small groups. Change and readjustment are rapid.

There are times at conferences in other cities when school people in Detroit are almost forced into the position of defending our use of subject matter specialists. With over 250 schools to service our school population, we must have experts available

¹ George B. de Huszar, *Practical Applications of Democracy*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945, p. 99.

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when we need them, rather than to "borrow" them from local universities or from other school systems and at their convenience. The subject matter specialist becomes to us a "vertical" supervisor who provides constant leadership in his particular area.

In the Detroit schools the principal is considered the "first-line" supervisor for general education. His program of guidance cuts through the school curriculum in a horizontal manner. Thus there begins to emerge a skeleton outline of the supervisory or administrative pattern in our educational system: over 250 "general" supervisors, about 50 supervisors who are subject matter specialists, 8 district administrative assistants, 5 assistant superintendents, a deputy superintendent, and the superintendent. Such a formidable array of administrators could well make a supervisor hesitate before initiating a campaign for curriculum change in a school system of this size. A supervisor should hesitate long enough to study just how the system operates so that his efforts will not be doomed to failure before he has even begun.

Educational psychologists in the past 50 years have learned much about the behavior of human beings. They know pretty well how boys and girls and adults are motivated to learn. Appreciation and security, both physical and emotional, are as important to teachers and administrators as they are to pupils in the classroom. One must keep this idea constantly in mind when he makes first steps in a project of curriculum

improvement. He should find answers to the following questions:

1. What is the status of teaching in a particular subject matter area at the present time?
2. In the light of the objectives, how far would the administrative and teaching staff have to move to achieve the desired goal?
3. What are the physical and emotional blocks that stand in the way of progress in the project?
4. Of the administrative staff, who are the people responsible for shaping instructional policy?
5. Who could best encourage and further the program with his support?
6. Are there agreement and unanimity in the thinking of the supervisory personnel (the subject matter specialists)?
7. Are there any peculiar pitfalls to avoid in this particular project?
8. How should one proceed? -

An Integrated Approach

The particular project that served as a vehicle for this attempt at instructional improvement was the initiation and the extension of an integrated program in the teaching of the language arts in the elementary school. In *The English Language Arts*, the new publication of the National Council of Teachers of English, Dora Smith writes about a trend in the teaching of the language arts that began more than 20 years ago: "Today the tendency is even more pronounced to develop integrated units or activities involving reading, writing, speaking and listening about topics or enterprises of daily concern to boys and girls. At the elementary school level, the old program of twenty minutes of 'language,' twenty minutes of 'spelling,' and twenty minutes of 'composition' is fast disappearing."²

² The Commission on the English Curriculum, *The English Language Arts*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1952, p. 326.

On reading the above statement, The Language Education Department of Detroit felt that such an integrated language arts program, recommended by leaders in the field over a 20 year period, should be in practice in scores of classrooms throughout the city.

Staff members asked themselves these questions: What are the characteristics of this kind of teaching? How would one describe what goes on in the classroom if the teacher used such a unified approach?

The objective behind this kind of teaching in the area of communication skills was to produce a well integrated individual who would realize and make use of the interrelation that exists among the different language arts and other subject matter areas. To achieve such an integration in the mind and body of a child, teachers in the fields of reading, English, spelling, handwriting and literature would need to practice certain recommendations of educational psychologists, such as:

1. Learning is more effective in several areas in which the teacher tries a unified approach, a multiple-sensory activity, or a total learning experience involving different areas of subject matter.

2. Learning is more effective when the activity is meaningful and purposeful, appealing to the interest and meeting the felt needs of the individual at his own level.

3. Learning is made more effective through a repetition of the learning experience in a pleasant environment and not through the tedium of isolated drill.

4. Learning in the subject matter area, and in assuming the responsibilities of good citizenship, is encouraged through pupil-teacher planning.

5. Learning is made more certain if time is taken for evaluation of progress and for giving remedial help to those individuals who need special assistance.

Operating in the belief that such statements as the above are true, teachers would provide learning experiences that would be sure to fit the interests and needs of their pupils, and that would offer the most opportunity for practice in democratic procedures. There would be many chances to plan, to study problems, to seek for information, to check the facts, and to act accordingly. This would make for a more unified and coordinated curriculum for each year, and tend toward the kind of scholarship and growth that would suit the maturity of the children involved. The younger teachers coming from recent special methods courses in colleges of education should be skilled in and practicing that kind of teaching. Such was the thinking among the members of the language education staff of supervisors.

With agreement among the supervisors that such teaching is desirable, they thought the problem was limited to working out the techniques more for the extension than the initiation of an integrated language arts program wherever possible.

Before trying to carry the philosophy of an integrated program to the classroom teachers, the supervisors themselves had to be thoroughly convinced of its value.³

The sequence of events or meetings from this point on was considered most important and necessary to insure the success of the undertaking. In brief, the procedure was as follows:

Members of the language education

³ Clarence W. Wachner, "An Evaluation of a Supervisor's Use of Three Techniques Designed to Facilitate Further Improvement of a General Language Program." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Wayne University, 1951, p. 128.

supervisory staff met with the supervising director of the division of instruction and the assistant superintendent in charge of instruction. Out of the informal discussion at this meeting came the suggestion that the proposition be presented to the language arts committee of the elementary district administrative assistants.

The divisional director of the language department met with the language arts committee. This committee was favorably impressed with the suggestion, and thought that the project should be discussed with the eight administrative assistants.

At the meeting of administrative assistants it was agreed that one school in each of the eight districts would be selected as a pilot school for the experiment.

The principals of the eight pilot schools, the eight administrative assistants, and the members of the language education supervisory staff met to discuss plans for the pilot study. The principals suggested that the language education staff meet with the teachers of the pilot schools, and explain to them what would be expected of each teacher involved in the study.

In the meetings that followed, with all the teachers of the pilot schools involved, each supervisor gave suggestions for integrating his special subject matter into the total language arts area. Individuals were encouraged to ask questions. At these meetings great care was taken to establish a feeling of security among the teachers. No radical changes were being contemplated. This was a project designed to *extend* the fine work that good teachers had always done in providing real life experiences

for boys and girls and in making learning more meaningful. Such reassurance seemed necessary. It helped to establish the proper kind of "climate" so that suggestions from supervisors would be more readily received. At this meeting teachers agreed to keep a record of what they were doing so that successful units and projects could be shared with other teachers at a later date. The value of this accomplishment cannot be overestimated. The recording of classroom experiences by the teacher in itself proved to be a powerful evaluation technique and a wonderful stimulus toward further growth for the teacher and the school concerned.

All Are Involved

Then followed a period of teacher visitations, encouragement and sharing. The eight schools were visited frequently by each of eight different supervisors covering all phases of the language arts program. Supervisors of kindergarten, elementary reading, spelling and handwriting, auditorium, English and literature, later elementary reading, and foreign language observed teaching in each area mentioned and at all grade levels from kindergarten through the eighth grade. These initial visits were more for the orientation of the respective supervisors than for the purpose of waging a particular campaign. Out of these early observations evolved a picture in the minds of the members of the language education staff of the quality and kind of teaching current in each school, the caliber of the teaching and administrative staff, and the difficulties or blocks that stood in the way of extending the integrated language arts program in each building.

The fact that supervisors were visiting with the obvious and only purpose of working on the project seemed to open doors to classrooms and also to the minds, or rather "hearts," of teachers. Principals and teachers welcomed the visitors and their suggestions as helps toward the further improvement of the language arts program. Visits were characterized by a comfortable lack of tension and by a friendly rapport that held bright promise for the success of the project.

Many fine teachers in a few schools had already worked out an integrated program in a modified form. The principals in these schools had created a permissive climate for them and others to extend their efforts. Now came their opportunity to go "all out" in encouraging these leaders to develop a more unified approach in all their teaching. Committees were organized, small group meetings were held and ideas were shared. Each school was encouraged to develop its program as it chose, and as best fitted the needs of the school community. Some schools felt that the project should not be limited to the language arts, but that it should involve all subject matter areas. All departments contributed to the program, and most helpful were the instruments produced by the faculties in these buildings.

Included in the planning was a series of evaluation meetings attended by the language education staff, principals of the pilot schools, and other interested administrators. These meetings took on the nature of progress reports or testimonials on what each school had accomplished to date. Principals presented reports, both orally and in writ-

ten form, on how their good teachers were solving their problems. Successful techniques were shared freely, and from each of these meetings each principal went back to his building to pass on to teachers new and helpful suggestions. The office of the language education department served as a clearinghouse for ideas. Reports and notes of meetings, mimeographed bulletins, unit plans, and bibliographies of reference materials were sent out to the teachers at well timed and spaced intervals. At no time was the project permitted to lag or stagnate.

By the end of the first semester schools and teachers had been visited, large and small meetings had been held, exhibits had been organized, demonstration lessons had been given, and other schools had become involved. Principals and teachers in other buildings had been caught up in the spirit of the project, and wanted to be included.

April was designated as the month for the final progress report on the project to the administrative assistants of the eight districts. This report took the form of an exhibit and oral presentation made by the principal of each participating school. The excellent materials exhibited, the encouraging reports rendered, and the general good feeling of successful accomplishments made a most favorable impression on the administrative assistants, the supervising director of the division of instruction, and the deputy superintendent. The language arts committee of the administrative assistants recommended that the integrated language arts program be extended to five *more* schools in each district—thus making a

total of 48 elementary schools formally committed to the project. About sixty other schools manifested a desire to participate also. They worked along unofficially and profited by the "fringe benefits" that accrue in any active evaluation program. The new year saw more than 100 schools working for improvement in the teaching of the language arts. This is approximately one-half the elementary schools in the city, and represents an achievement of magnificent proportions when one takes time to enumerate the number of teachers and pupils involved. From here on the movement toward integration attained enough momentum of its own to be carried on to its ultimate conclusion, general and voluntary acceptance as a most meaningful and worth-while instrument for teaching the communication skills.

In retrospect the writer would like to point up those factors that helped spell success for this project in a large city school system:

1. Unanimity of agreement and purpose existed in the minds of all participants on the supervisory level.

2. Administrators responsible for making decisions and changes in all parts of the system were involved in the planning.

3. Utmost care was taken to foster good

human relations, respecting scrupulously the authority vested in each administrator and supervisor and the importance of each individual teacher.

4. Teachers and principals were made to feel secure in their positions. Criticisms of present methods and suggestions for improvement came from the participants. No one's status was jeopardized.

5. "Natural" leaders among principals and teachers were encouraged and given free rein to use their particular talents. Through sharing and acknowledgment each creative effort was recognized by the large group as a valuable contribution.

6. The study stressed the practical and the useful. Techniques and instruments that had been tested in actual practice were communicated to others. Teachers were quick to profit by the "teacher-helps" and suggestions that began to appear early in the study.

7. And last, but not least, there existed a forward looking and understanding kind of leadership on the part of the administration that encouraged every effort for instructional improvement.

The success of this project seems to indicate that a new idea based on a sound philosophy of education, worked out according to proven psychological principles, and adequately presented in the light of good human relations, stands a very good chance of becoming accepted by any school system, large or small, in a reasonable length of time.

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