

Research in Curriculum

THERE IS no more important area for research in education than the area of curriculum. Budget, buildings, equipment, staff are justified by the extent to which they implement desirable educational programs. Parents are concerned primarily with the nature of the educational experiences their children are having in school. The responsibilities of a teacher to a group of first grade children are best expressed by the instructional program of the first grade. Yet research in curriculum which deals with the over-all conception of an educational program is conspicuous by its absence.

No one argues any more about the importance of what we know about children and their development and learning processes in the planning and development of educational programs in school. Yet we have few thoughtful and rigorous examinations of the important generalizations growing out of the work in the fields of learning and development and even fewer attempts to see the application and contribution of these generalizations to the learning experiences of children in school.

The exciting research in social behavior which has to do with leadership, group action, the influence of group performance on individual decisions as to what is right and wrong, and in the production of psychotic behavior is almost terrifying in its potential for building significant educational programs for human good on the one

hand or for brain washing and the creation of a puppet state on the other.

For many years we have dreamed of the power and importance of research in the areas of learning, development, and social behavior and wished for the contribution it could make to curriculum. We have learned the bitter lessons that research in these areas does not automatically make contributions to educational programs and that educational programs include more than just generalizations about learning, development, and social behavior.

Both of the above lessons are difficult to learn but their point seems clear. There is a distinctive area of curriculum research which should be beyond studies of learning and which should be related to using the contributions of work in these fields to deal with the curriculum tasks of planning, developing, and testing educational activities for children in some kind of meaningful educational framework.

In all fairness, however, we have probably worked harder on the above problems than we have in another area of curriculum research—the problems involved in dealing with the common and persisting tasks of curriculum and instruction. We are constantly talking about *defining* our objectives, *selecting* learning experiences, *organizing* and *developing* these experiences, and *evaluating* their educational significance. Yet an examination of the professional literature will

find little material on the definition of objectives for purposes other than appraisal. Similarly, the problem of sequence or continuity in educational programs is relatively ignored in curriculum research. Every teacher deals with the problem of organizing learning activities; yet it is difficult to find any studies on this problem. We are continually worrying over the fact that we can evaluate facts and information better than abilities and abilities better than attitudes and values, yet we find very little effort to deal more effectively with this problem. Shouldn't we study the problem of evaluation from the point of view of curriculum and instruction as well as that of appraisal and test making?

Traditionally, our curriculum has been broken down into subjects and while a few courageous individuals down through the ages have developed other ways to organize educational programs, this has not been a very popular activity. Should the next twenty years be as barren in this respect as have been the past twenty?

The hullabaloo of the moment in the skill areas of our curriculum is over a popular and financially rewarding attack on reading. The most interesting aspect about the present scene in reading is that, of all the skill areas, this is the one most adequately documented by research. No important work in handwriting has been done in twenty years; spelling is an area of great conviction and large ignorance; arithmetic, in contrast, has profited from a steady and continuing series of studies on important phases of its development. From the point of view of our experience in reading,

one can either be impressed with the fact that the research bases of our present program of teaching reading have not been well communicated or that the research programs in reading have been limited in their conception of the task. Could it be that the effort of the past twenty years has been directed primarily at the development of improved reading materials and has not been directed to the same degree to the continuing critical examination of the foundation ideas of such programs?

The plea of this editorial is that teachers, supervisors and administrators should have convictions about what constitutes good education but should not be starry eyed advocates of pat answers as to techniques and particular roads to the good life. Teachers and supervisors can do much to "product" test instructional procedures and materials against important educational goals and behavioral changes in children. Administrators can do much to create the educational climate which will permit and encourage this kind of testing and constructive development of instructional programs to take place.

Members of college and university staffs have a responsibility for research in curriculum too. We need to spend at least a portion of our time in working on the key questions of curriculum and on the related questions of appropriate research methodology. It is likely too that university people should spend some of this time in working with educational staffs in the field on the problem of the application of these ideas to instructional practices. Curriculum re-

search needs both of these related phases of curriculum study to make the contributions of the future.

One dictum of research is that the research problem dictates the data and the method. The consequence of this postulate for curriculum research is that different kinds of research problems dictate different kinds of data and research procedures. Work on the identification and definition of objectives will not deal with the same kind of data and research method as a study of the comparative efficiency of two methods of teaching handwriting or a study of the leadership roles of student chairmen of working groups. The design for a research study is determined by the nature of the problem and the kinds of questions for which we need answers. This is common to all research effort. Our need in curriculum research is to see clearly the unique kinds of problems we need to study and the questions about them we need to ask. Then we can develop the number of different and appropriate research plans for dealing with these problems adequately. Classical experimental procedures and traditional statistical design may not be appropriate to deal with problems which may call for creative synthesis, the historical method, or the application of value positions.

The purpose of all curriculum research is to add to our understanding and control of the educational program. Control is indicated by the sharpness of our direction and our ability to predict the future consequences of what we do. Research in curriculum has a particular obligation, therefore, to concern itself with

studies of value and the conceptual framework within which educational activities are selected, developed and evaluated. Too often curriculum research is directed at the means and the specific not at the ends and the over-all context in which both ends and means become meaningful and important. The great need in curriculum research is not either the means or the ends but both; not either teachers or college professors to do this research but some complementary and cooperative effort which will exploit the distinctive and unique strengths and contributions of all.

In this issue the reader will find articles which will attempt to deal with the problems of curriculum research and to illustrate how teachers, supervisors and curriculum workers are attacking these problems. The key concept of these articles is that if man will become sensitive to his problems, if he will bring his intelligence and research procedures to their understanding and development, and if he will appraise the consequences of such efforts by important educational values and goals, educational improvement is bound to result. Apparently all we have to do is to move with confidence to our educational problems and bring to their resolution the contributions of our experience, the disciplines of our intelligence, and the significances of our educational and social values. What other activity could be more exciting and important for ourselves and for all of America's children?

—VIRGIL E. HERRICK, *professor of education, University of Wisconsin, Madison.*

Copyright © 1956 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.