

Getting Evidence for Making INSTRUCTIONAL DECISIONS

To what sources may school people turn in getting evidence for making wise decisions concerning the instructional program? This article shows the pivotal role of the classroom teacher in obtaining such evidence and in implementing the decisions which result.

DECISIONS affecting the instructional program of a school are made at many different points, and by many different individuals and groups. The broad outlines of the program are developed as faculties, working both as individuals and in groups, take into account (a) the determination of objectives, (b) the planning of learning experiences appropriate to those objectives, (c) the organization of the program into some defensible sequence of activities, and (d) the evaluation of the degree to which desired learning is being achieved.

In each of these various aspects of curriculum planning there is the possibility of choice. In planning for instruction in the social studies, for example, a variety of possible objectives can be considered. A realistic view would seem to suggest that wise choices among objectives, with a resulting concentration of emphasis upon a few major ones, is to be preferred over an effort to achieve many discrete and unrelated goals. Similarly, there is no one royal road to learning, and a variety of means can be used to attain particular

objectives. Limitations of time and resources require that wise choices must be made. The literature in the curriculum field describes alternative methods of "organizing" the instructional program, and here again choice is necessary. There are several means by which progress toward objectives may be appraised. Part of the instructional task involves the selection of means most appropriate for evaluation in a given situation.

On what bases are such choices as these made? Not uncommonly, tradition or present practice is a persuasive force. Some educators are strongly influenced by promising innovations observed to be successful elsewhere. Looking to tradition and present practice tends to result in decisions which minimize the importance of changing conditions. To pursue a particular course of action, such as adopting a particular form of curriculum organization, merely because a neighboring community has had a successful experience with it is seldom wise. Instructional decisions can be made, however, on the basis of relevant evi-

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dence, systematically gathered and carefully interpreted. Such evidence can be continually sought to guide subsequent decision-making. The use of evidence in making instructional decisions increases the likelihood that the decisions will be appropriate to the situation, and that they will therefore have a genuine rather than a superficial effect upon the instructional program.

Sources for Evidence

There are a number of sources to which curriculum planners can turn for evidence useful in making decisions about the broad outlines of the instructional program. One of the sources is the body of data that can be accumulated about the students. To be genuinely useful for making important instructional decisions such data would need to include more than achievement test scores, important as these results may be. Interests, attitudes, values, vocational plans, home backgrounds, out-of-school activities, are among the items upon which helpful information can be collected. Many schools have found it useful to carry on follow-up studies after young people leave the school. Data about students permit a faculty to study the general characteristics of the population whose lives presumably are to be positively influenced by whatever kind of instructional program is planned. Often it is desirable to interpret such data as these in terms of the generalized patterns of behavior commonly found among young people in the age groups served

by the school. Many schools have found the concept of the "developmental task" useful in this respect.

A second source of data is the community of which the school is a part. It is not uncommon for teachers to be strangers to the communities in which they teach. Even teachers who have been in a particular school for some time frequently do not perceive the nature of profound changes occurring in the community until the change has been wrought. In large city schools, for example, the extent to which population shifts in the school community are changing the character of the total school population is sometimes less well understood by the staff as a whole than by a few teachers whose classes happen to be affected. In order to keep this problem before the entire faculty some principals maintain a map, displayed where all the staff may see, showing population movement in and out of the school district. Other aspects of community life need to be examined constantly in order to see what significance they may have for the important decisions involved in planning the instructional program. In these days of rapid change, the general character of community life can be markedly altered almost before one knows what is going on. Not infrequently the changes result in new demands upon the school and some consequent modification in its instructional program. A faculty can be guided toward wise decisions if evidence regarding these changes is readily available.

A third source of evidence useful in making instructional decisions pertains to the characteristics of the general cul-

ture in which our young people are to be inducted. In what respects are these characteristics quite stable and unlikely to change markedly in the foreseeable future? In what respects can rather profound changes be expected, with the result that new demands will be made upon the schools? Even a superficial glance back over the past three decades would reveal how much more broadly the task of civic education is conceived today than in the 1920's. Is it likely that the scope of education for citizenship will continue to expand? If so, in what respects? The current interest in strengthening educational programs in the sciences, in foreign languages, in mental as well as physical health, to name but a few areas, illustrates the manner in which the schools are expected to modify their programs in the light of anticipated as well as present societal needs. What other changes are in prospect? No school can afford these days to make instructional decisions without a careful assessment of present and future demands made by society upon young people. Schools are particularly intended to serve children and youth. They cannot serve children and youth well merely by providing an educational program well-suited to yesterday's world. Even though prediction in these matters is often difficult, the schools cannot do their job without considering the best evidence available about the shape of things to come.

A fourth source of evidence for making instructional decisions is found in the bodies of knowledge upon which the school can draw in planning its instructional program. In several of the fields which commonly contribute to

the school program the accumulation of new knowledge continues at a rapid pace indeed. Not only is this the case, but increasingly one hears demands that more attention must be given to concepts from fields not ordinarily included in the school curriculum: History and geography, for example, have traditionally provided the bulk of the subject matter for elementary school social studies. Yet today one hears much talk about drawing more heavily from economics, anthropology, and other social science disciplines, in planning the social studies programs at this level. Developments such as these would seem to suggest that, in making wise instructional decisions, a faculty must continually address itself to the problem of determining what the *essential* contribution of the various subject fields will be and how that contribution can best be realized. Continued reflections on these matters ought to deepen insights to the point where important instructional decisions regarding particular subjects can be more intelligently made.

A fifth source of evidence necessary in making wise instructional decisions is found in the growing body of knowledge regarding the conditions under which effective learning occurs. Students of the learning process are continually seeking deeper understanding of these conditions and the various ways in which they encourage or impede learning. One of the recent developments, for example, has emphasized the profound manner in which the nature and extent of individual learning are influenced by pressures exerted in face-to-face groups. Similarly, attention has been called for

some time now to the influence of social class factors upon school learning. Believing that learning is firmly rooted in perceptual experience, some workers in the field of science education recommend that the planning of the instructional program in that area must take into account the extent to which it is possible for students to have direct experience with the phenomena they are to study. Where this is difficult, or perhaps impossible, a question is raised as to whether the phenomena in question should be studied at all. Learning is often represented as occurring with maximum effectiveness when individuals are confronted with problem situations meaningful to them. This consideration leads those who plan instructional programs to organize their programs around problems believed to be important and significant to the learner. Obviously decisions need to be made as to which problems, and in what sequence. These examples serve to illustrate how knowledge about the factors that make for effective learning can help us make basic instructional decisions with a greater measure of confidence.

There are other sources of evidence to which curriculum planners may in due course turn with advantage. But perhaps enough has been said here to suggest some of the places where useful data may be found and something of the ways in which those data may be used.

The Teacher's Instructional Decisions

Of all the instructional decisions made, none is more important than those reached by the classroom teacher.

In his hands is placed the task of providing the proper context which will make possible the effective implementation of all previous decisions. It is in the classroom where the instructional program is transformed from a mere statement of good intentions to a sequence of actual experiences out of which hoped for learnings may come. The teacher's decisions, if they are to be wisely made, require familiarity with the types of evidence suggested above. While his task is by no means an easy one, the teacher does have at least one quite distinct advantage over those who must make decisions about the instructional program as a whole. The teacher has before him a particular group of individuals. This group can be studied intensively, both individually and collectively. The teacher does not have to rely solely upon sweeping generalizations about students of the age level with which he is concerned, even though such generalizations may be helpful to him. He has immediate access to the most important body of data needed to make wise decisions, namely, data concerning these particular students.

If he will take the trouble to collect these data as systematically as he can, they will speak volumes to him and help him make wisely the instructional decisions he must make. Toward what specific objectives ought instruction to be directed in a particular class? This can be properly assessed only with some idea as to where the students now stand with reference to the various objectives thought to be appropriate. There is no other source of valid data on this point than the students themselves. What are the kinds of experi-

ences needed by these particular individuals to accomplish the desired ends? This will depend in large measure upon the nature of their previous experiences, and here there is apt to be a great deal of variation. Again, there is no more valid data than those which can be provided by the class itself. With such data at hand the teacher is in a stronger position to decide whether certain types of experience are genuinely needed by all and whether other types are best used for particular individuals and small groups. Probably one of the greatest wastes of effort in our whole educational enterprise comes from the trouble to which we go to insist that all students have experiences which may be repetitive for some, and hence inappropriate, or which may be

premature for others, and hence likewise inappropriate.

Since the matter of how the classroom teacher gets and uses evidence is treated elsewhere in this issue, the point need not be labored here. It is perhaps sufficient to remind ourselves that decision-making in the classroom is the decision-making that counts. It determines what the actual instructional program will be. It provides the conditions which are thought to be appropriate in order to have genuinely effective instruction. With so much at stake, it would seem that the conscientious teacher has no alternative but to accumulate continuously and systematically the kind of evidence he needs to guide his own decisions with respect to instructional problems.

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The Interdependent Roles of Research and Evaluation in Teaching

"The teacher introduces new procedures after analyzing their relevance for his situation and then evaluates their impact upon the students with respect to objectives of instruction."

ROUGHLY, the somewhat vague word, "research," refers to three interrelated types of activities: consideration of written and oral reports by persons other than oneself, experimentation, and controlled experimentation. When speaking of the "experimental method" in education, frequently we mean trying out new approaches rather informally in the classroom, without most of the controls characterizing a labora-

tory experiment, and attempting to assess the effectiveness of these procedures by synthesizing various types of information subjectively. Such experimentation may stem from library research, discussion of teaching methods with others, in-service training and courses taken, urging of supervisors, and systematic theory. Experimentation starts from the same bases, especially library research and theory, but

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