

Curriculum Research

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THE Research Commission, in its planning for the research column for the current year, suggested that problems needing study in the curriculum field should be emphasized during the 1956-1957 school year. One way of increasing the effectiveness of curriculum research is to make certain that vital problems are explored. The column this year will attempt to highlight needed research in the curriculum field.

Possibilities of Curriculum Research

LOOKING AHEAD at the beginning of the school year, the educational worker sees the need for curriculum research that will help him arrive at better solutions to many educational problems. The questions of what to do about promotions, failures, marks, grouping, disciplinary policies are problems of this type that plague us in the schools. But there are even more fundamental questions about the interaction of pupils with their environment, questions that deal with what conditions will make for a high quality of experience. In other words, what will help children learn or change their behavior in desired ways? For curriculum research deals with the kinds of conditions in the environment and the way in which the pupil interacts with his environment that will lead to a change of behavior.

Many of the practical problems can best be solved by doing the research ourselves in our own school situation. Curriculum committees study such a question as promotional policies and arrive at a conclusion based upon what they discover in basic research and practice, but they often stop at that point, just where promising action research studies can be carried on. For what they have actually

done is to arrive at an hypothesis that now needs to be tested in their situation. This is one of the really promising fronts of curriculum research, since it represents an experimental attitude, a careful evaluation of any changes made. It is one of the needed kinds of research. No one can formulate the problems to be studied except those who are involved.

One of the needs in curriculum research is the concerted attack on a problem, as is being done, for example, in nuclear physics or medicine in which many research centers are conducting experiments simultaneously. Such an approach would tend to raise the level of research from the fragmentary and piecemeal kind that is often done for graduate degrees. Few studies of the breadth and scope of the Eight-Year Study have been conducted. There are unlimited and often uncharted opportunities for cooperative research among students and staff in universities, and in cooperation with schools. Only a few public schools have research centers; most depend upon consultative services for projects of an extensive nature.

A related need is cooperation with other disciplines. Much of the research basic to curriculum improvement comes

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from the fields of psychology, sociology and anthropology, such as research in learning, individual differences, human relations and group dynamics. If a broader attack is to be made upon studying systematically the conditions under which change of behavior occurs, the interdisciplinary approach becomes not only desirable but necessary. Isolating small segments of these conditions in a laboratory where all the factors that operate in the public schools are not present or are not studied is insufficient. Then, too, the behavioral sciences furnish the framework and suggest methods for research on curriculum problems. A correlative need is for research based on well-formulated problems related to theory which grows out of basic research in the behavioral sciences.

If the total situation that affects the pupil's learning in school is to be studied, the curriculum field needs imaginative

research techniques. A real opportunity exists for contributions to creativity and pioneering in research methods, breaking away from the established or routine way of doing things. A significant research study that adds to the knowledge of mankind can make its contribution through research methods as well as other findings. Action research in many cases must develop new instruments for gathering data. Describing a total constellation of factors demands some new techniques and procedures. For these the research in the behavioral sciences has valuable suggestions.

These are some of the fundamental needs of curriculum research. The problem formulation is the task of those cooperatively doing the research. Perhaps one of the most promising indications that curriculum research in the future will be concerned with the totality of the situation that affects the pupil comes

out of the field of child study. Children are studied in a particular school environment and culture, with attention to all the factors that impinge upon them and their own growth pattern and perception of the situation. Teachers who participate in child study become concerned about the kinds of experiences they can provide to achieve optimum growth of the children they study.

A few illustrations of the kinds of issues in the curriculum field that need concerted and cooperative study can be suggested. These are problems of concern to curriculum leaders. For example, there is the question of values that guide the curriculum. In times of rapid economic and industrial changes, the differences in values are accentuated. Values differ for the social groups in our culture. Included in this question is the effect of community values upon pupil behavior and the effect of teachers' values upon pupils. Studies of the longitudinal type are sorely needed to deal with the effect of school experiences upon the attitudes toward segregation or integration. The whole area of teaching about controversial subjects is tied into this problem. A related question is the effect on children's experiences of different means of operating with lay citizens. More information is needed on how to work with lay people in order to improve school practices. Implied are sociological community studies where strife and conflict exist, with the resulting influences upon children. The effect of pressure groups upon the curriculum, for example, does not lend itself to a segmented, cross-sectional type of study.

The arrangement, design or organization of the curriculum that best promotes learning *under different conditions* bears study. This question is, of course, not unrelated to the approach that the

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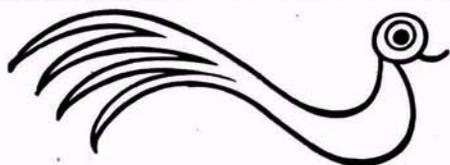
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teacher uses in developing learning experiences with pupils; for example, the effectiveness of problem-solving in different areas of instruction and at different levels. Does a student learn better in college through seminars, workshops and laboratory situations? What does he learn, and in what fields are these procedures most applicable? In this connection, profitable study could be made of how knowledge about the child, adolescent or adult affects the way teachers plan and organize learning experiences. A fundamental issue involved is the breadth of the objectives of the school.

More needs to be known about how teachers themselves change in behavior. What causes a teacher to become rigid and set, and what processes can assist teachers in developing flexibility, an attitude of experimentation, and an objective look at change? Again, the question is one of what pattern of total conditions promotes teacher improvement and

what conditions impede change. Related to these questions is the matter of determining teacher competency which faces educators in view of the growing demands for merit rating. How a school system moves ahead in curriculum improvement might well involve a number of intensive case studies.

Of no little concern is the curriculum for the preparation of teachers, coupled with the proposed ways of solving the teacher shortage. Doubtless, much cooperative research within colleges is needed to determine conditions under which preservice preparation is most effective. Otherwise anyone's ideas that receive the greatest amount of public attention or pressure may prevail. The teacher shortage, present and impending, in public schools and colleges may result in a number of harebrained schemes unless carefully planned research and evaluation are done. The present situation may also result in a detriment to some areas of instruction other than science and mathematics because of the resulting neglect of other fields. These problems point toward cooperative action research by colleges and schools, involving many college departments.

These are only a few areas of problems. Many others could be pointed out, such as developing measurement devices for the "intangibles," what happens to the slow learning child under different conditions, what facilitates the rapid and balanced development of the gifted up to maximum potentiality, and what perceptions do these different kinds of children have of the school situation? These should suffice to suggest a needed depth and breadth of curriculum research, both basic and applied.

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