Curriculum Research

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Teachers and Needed Research in Curriculum

RESEARCH in curriculum is difficult primarily because the term curriculum refers to everything of importance in education but specifies very little in particular. It is the purpose of this article, therefore, to mention four important areas of curriculum research in which the teacher must become an active agent, but to discuss only one in order to illustrate the kinds of specific problems involved and the lines of attack possible.

In dealing with the various problems of curriculum, the curriculum worker is confronted with two alternatives. One possibility is to say: here is an answer or position about objectives, organization, etc., which is right and our important problem is to use this answer in developing educational programs. A second, and what seems to the authors to be a more desirable alternative in curriculum research, is to say: here is an important area of curriculum decision and we must attempt to describe and test the operations and procedures by which answers can be made in this decision area with some confidence.

These areas of study in curriculum are: (a) the realm of educational objectives and their *use* by children and teachers in the teaching-learning process; (b) the problem of selecting and organizing learning experiences; (c) the problem of evaluation viewed as an integral part of the teaching-learning process; and (d) the more general problem of the nature of the over-all structure or curriculum plan of the total educational program. It is recognized that these problem areas are not new and that they represent areas almost as comprehensive as the universe covered by the term, "curriculum." It is argued, however, that they do represent important and continuing responsibilities in teaching and curriculum, that they represent responsibilities to be met in the daily lives of all teachers, and that any contribution to them must necessarily involve teachers at some critical point. Unfortunately, too, they represent areas in which little research is being done.

Objectives as an Area of Research in Curriculum

There are at least four important operational problems in the area of educational objectives—how they are derived, how they are stated, how they are defined, and how they are used. Some may feel that teachers are most concerned with the final problem of use. Others may feel that the nature of the statement and definition of the objective is frequently determined by its use. The present authors would argue, for example, that the definition of an objective in terms of its essential components is most useful if the purpose is to use this definition to select desirable learning activities and materials for instruction. Similarly, be-

havioral definitions are most useful for evaluation purposes and operational definitions are valuable when dealing with educational processes. There does not seem to be a simple answer here. The authors would like to propose for further testing the hypothesis that a single objective, as it is used in decision making, will need to be defined differently to help perform its many tasks; yet all of the different forms of definition should stem from a single basic meaning given to the objective. Operational or behavioral definitions of objectives are not ends but merely different tools for doing particular educational jobs more effectively.

There is little discussion in the literature as to how objectives are actually derived either by important learned commissions or by a teacher working with a specific group of children. In general, we talk about deriving our objectives from knowing the individual and his needs or from knowing the society and its persistent problems or from trying to see what has been important in our culture and passing it on. Everyone tends to accept these referents as being important; everyone senses that they all are involved. Yet, few have been able to show the relationship that should exist or to reveal the actual processes and operations that are involved in deriving objectives from any or all of these referents.

Everyone agrees that if there is anything about which school faculties and communities should reach some consensus, it should be their educational objectives at some level of statement and definition. Yet, how many of the present readers of this article are working on a staff where these agreements are reached and used consistently to give continuity and direction to a common educational program at more than the verbal level? At the teaching level, everyone discussing the teaching process makes an important point that teacher objectives and pupil objectives or purposes must come together at some point in the learning activities if effective classroom instruction is to be developed. The role of the teacher and the problem of consensus is important at both the staff level and at the level of children in dealing with educational objectives.

It is proposed here that irrespective of the level of definition or school operation considered, it would seem that our science of curriculum should be exploring the problem of the derivation of objectives in order that these procedures may become known, tested and improved. The educational and social processes through which consensus is reached in the identification of our educational goals have tremendous import for educational improvement. Curriculum committees, curriculum coordinators, and teachers would improve their practices if such information were either better known or developed more adequately.

Approaches to Studying Educational Objectives

One simple way of moving in on some of the problems of objectives would be merely to interview teachers systematically as to how they make some of the decisions in which objectives are usually involved and to try and trace down what teachers really do. Marcella Nerbovig did this with some rather interesting results.[1] Most experienced teachers, for example, know that they should use objectives in selecting the learning experiences of children. Few, however, actually do use them as the point of initial departure in their teaching. More often they

[1] Marcella Nerbovig. "Teachers' Perception of the Use of Objectives." Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Education, University of of Wisconsin, 1956.

start with a page of a book, a project, a topic, a geographic area, an object or a center of interest and try to see what will grow out of it that is important.

Another interesting procedure to use in moving into this problem would be to take some of the present lists of objectives on any level—the closer to teacher use, the better—and see how they might be stated and defined so that a teacher might be able to use them more effectively in dealing with his instructional activities. Helping teachers use simple tests of logic in the refinement of lists of objectives would be of great help to the profession. For example, two different objectives should not be restatements of the same objectives using different words or be statements of the same objective on different levels of generality. Furthermore an objective is better stated if only one important component is considered at a time. Objectives are better stated also if methods of instruction, instructional materials, and principles of learning are left out. True, these are all important things to be considered in developing an educational program for children and should be talked about at some place in the curriculum program but there is no reason why the statement of one objective should include everything.

In dealing with lists of objectives, the fallacies of the 1, 2, 3 frequently cause trouble. It is important in listing objectives to make clear that objective 1 is different from objective 2 or 3, that objective 2 does or does not operationally follow 1 or precede 3, or that objective 1 is of primary importance and that 2 and 3 are of descending significance. Most lists of objectives do not make explicit what the list is saying about these important notions.

Any study of objectives will reveal the trouble that the weasel words of adjectives and adverbs create in statements of objectives. Frequently we use them as a way of avoiding the issue. Take for example the objective—to develop the common fundamental skills or to develop the basic concepts of number. Fundamental and basic are words that cause trouble. Won't you need to define what these skills or concepts are?

Another valuable attempt to get at the definition of objectives has been the activities of the group working with Benjamin Bloom on the *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*.[2] Any group of teachers or curriculum workers would find this bulletin providing many helpful suggestions of ways to state and define educational objectives. The University of Texas group is starting from another direction by helping teachers keep anecdotal records of their classroom activities and then analyzing these to identify common teaching problems and to discover ways in which their problems can be handled more effectively.

This short analysis of the problem area of educational objectives suggests some of the operational problems involved in their derivation, definition and use, and some of the ways that teachers and their curriculum resources can be involved in their study. It is hoped that enough has been said to reveal the great need for more adequate study of these problems and the tremendous value that any contribution in this field has for improved teaching and education. The central figure in both study and implementation of this knowledge is the teacher.

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[2] Benjamin S. Bloom, Editor. *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives.* New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1956, 192 p.