

Curriculum Research

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Planning Future Research in Education

WE HAVE COME a long way in the appraisal and evaluation of our schools if we define objectives solely in terms of mastery of specific facts and skills. With a minimum of effort we can compare the "achievement" of a given student with norms for a state or national sample, and observe his progress from year to year. This is an important accomplishment. But what of our attempts to produce self-discipline, democratic attitudes, moral and ethical values, maturity, better citizens, more effective and happier *people*? Criteria for evaluating our success in these areas are hazy and confused. For the most part we are reduced to measuring such things as local and national delinquency rates, voter participation in elections, the increasing incidence of mental disease, rock 'n roll riots, and the sincere and active concern of parents and teachers about children's attitudes. We need to know much more about what is happening to the object of education, the child himself, and the impact of schooling on his behavior.

The real determinants of human behavior, according to modern psychology, lie in the meanings and understandings, the perceptions of people. This means that to appraise and evaluate we must find ways of exploring the individual's feelings about things, his doubts, hopes, wonders, questions, conflicts, fears and hostilities. The crucial questions for research become: How does he see (a) himself, (b) the world he lives in, and

(c) the interaction of these? While we all know from our own experience that perceptions govern our own behavior, we know very little about the effects of schooling on the personal meanings of children. We need such information desperately if we are to really evaluate the success of our efforts in education.

We have an urgent need for research which will give us information about the way the individual student perceives himself and his world. We need to know, for example, how he sees, feels about, perceives such things as:

1. *School, in general.* Does this experience add up, for him, to something good or bad? Important or unimportant? Pleasant or unpleasant? Painful or satisfying?
2. *Specific curriculum experiences.* What does the experience of a math class, a school band, a core class *mean* to him? Has it made him feel more adequate, more skillful, more effective?
3. *His peers.* Are they, generally, threatening to him, or satisfying? Does he feel he belongs? Is accepted? Must conform? How does he see the opposite sex?
4. *Teachers—generally and specifically.* To what extent are they seen as helpful, understanding, human, restrictive, punitive, fair, etc.? Friends or enemies? Strong or weak? Wise or foolish?
5. *Administrators.* Sources of help or trouble? Are rules and punishments good or bad, just or unjust?
6. *Parents and home.* Sources of

strength, security and help or strain, uncertainty and conflict?

7. *Himself*. Adequate or inadequate? Liked or disliked? Is the future safe or threatening?

Once we have achieved an understanding of some of these ways in which children perceive, we can study changes in perceptions and the factors related to such changes. We will also be in a position to explore the relationship between personal meaning and a long list of student and teacher behaviors. We can ask, for example, what is the relationship between the perceptions in the left hand column and any of the behaviors in the right hand column?

<i>Perceptions</i>	<i>Behaviors</i>
How students see:	of students who:
themselves	under achieve
their school	over achieve
teachers	fail in reading
administration	are leaders
peers	are followers
parents	are delinquent
friends	are disturbed
mathematics	are elected to office
Latin	make the honor society
social studies	rebel against school
gymnasium	are passive and daydreaming
etc.	etc.

Any teacher can add to these lists as he pleases with assurance that any light he can shed by comparing items in one column with those in the other will represent an important contribution.

But how does one proceed in getting information about how the individual sees himself and his world? At first glance, it may seem to be simply a task of selecting the right questions and getting direct information from the individual himself. Questionnaires, self-rating scales, etc., have been used in this way,

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and can give valuable information about the subject's *behavior* in specific situations. However, the way a person answers questions, or rates himself, is a function of his perceptions of self in that situation; but does not tell us what his self-perceptions *are*. To describe personal meanings it is necessary to draw *inferences* from his behavior. One must answer the question: "How would a person have to see himself and his world to behave this way?" Perceptions cannot be gleaned directly. They can only be inferred from the behavior observed. To do this it is necessary for the researcher to find common kinds of relatively spontaneous behavior which can be observed and from which inferences can be drawn. This means that categorizing behavior itself is not enough. There is no substitute for the trained, sensitive, experienced observer and interpreter of the behavior, if we are to get back of the act itself and see the meanings it may have to the individual. Nor do we need to apologize for this "subjective" element in the evaluation. Science and knowledge have progressed mainly by the process of applying inferences drawn from observed phenomena to data which were not susceptible to direct observation.

There are many potentially useful methods of attacking this problem. The field of projective techniques, including such things as picture-story tests, projective drawing, sentence completion, etc., offers a great deal of promise. We need to experiment with adaptations of these techniques. Other useful material can be obtained from unstructured play situa-

tions, autobiographies, and structured and unstructured personal interviews. Understanding of student perceptions can also be determined as they are revealed in school assignments, projects and papers, in art productions or the free interaction of students in discussion settings. Observations of children in the classroom, on the playground, etc., can add further valuable information.

We believe that education needs desperately to find better ways of appraising the effects of the school program on individual children. Since human behavior depends primarily on feelings, values and attitudes, we need to study the way children perceive themselves and their world. When we have adequate information about the ways children perceive themselves and the world about them and when we know much more about how these ways of perceiving are related to the ways children behave, we will be in possession of the keys we need to make important strides forward in curriculum revision. The traditional methods of testing do not seem to be appropriate for our purpose. We must, then, find ways of observing children systematically, and attempt to infer, from the observed behavior, answers to the questions of how they see themselves and their schools, and what is really happening to them in terms of basic values, feelings and perceptions.

When we know these things, a whole new future will lie before us.

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