

## Education Is Too Important...

**“A satisfactory school program requires the blending of three voices—the voice of the research specialist, the voice of the practitioner and the voice of the people.”**

**E**DUCATION is too important to be left to the educators alone. A satisfactory school program, like a satisfactory program for any public service, requires the blending of three voices—the voice of the research specialist, the voice of the practitioner and the voice of the people. If each voice follows its designated and appropriate part, harmony is likely. If it does not, dissonance is assured.

The voice of the research specialist brings ideas and findings, tested by controlled experiment or distilled from case studies. He constantly asks for change—in objective or procedure—to respond better to needs of the society the program serves. Research has significance as it suggests and focuses change. Its usefulness, in addition to stimulating change, lies in guiding change in directions expected to be fruitful so that the tremendous effort required in changing anything will be more likely to be repaid than would be likely if change were whimsical, restless or merely uninformed. Research aids in preventing the “’tis-tain’t” kind of controversy, since, within its limits, it speaks with an authority which supersedes opinion and thereby better defines the areas in which argument can be helpful. It permits the other voices to make full contributions from their unique qualities, and points to the limits within which the other voices can effectively speak.

Without benefit of the research specialist, the other voices—those of the practitioner and the public—can easily lose their usefulness by resisting change through repetition of outworn phrases or through the smugness of the once-successful. Without research, the practitioner or the public may tend to gloss over their difficulties, or to attack them without insight. Without research, they may tend to keep on telling the old stories which once were full of interest, unaware that fresh stories must be found and used if a new audience is to listen with profit. The voice of research must be heard. The specialist, as the professional scholar, urges change, but urges that it be undertaken with intelligence and executed with economy of effort.

But let there be no mistake—research, by itself, is not enough to provide proper direction for a public service program. To it must first be added the voice of professional experience, supplied by the practitioner who day-by-day, week-by-week, translates the results of research into procedures and programs, and does this essential job amid all the pressures of providing the services for which the programs are designed. In schools, the practitioner is the teacher, the classroom instructor, the principal, the supervisor, and the superintendent.

A teacher, ordinarily, is unable to judge the validity of a research finding in a scientific field, except perhaps

through the reputation of the research specialist or through some understanding of the methods employed. Customarily, the teacher cannot, and indeed, should not, test the research by replicating it. His kind of test is different. Out of his individual, unique experience, the teacher must test the research result to decide whether the idea, already tested in one way by the research that produced it, is *desirable* and *feasible* in his own situation. For, to a significant extent, his situation is always unique, and he absorbs research ideas into his program without check only at his peril. To find out whether, *for his program*, the idea is desirable, he must ask what impact the changes necessary for adopting the idea would have on other parts of the program. He must judge whether the values anticipated by the change are great enough and continuing enough to repay the costs of change. And if he decides by answers to these and other questions that the change is desirable, he must then determine whether the change is *feasible*—whether he is competent to execute the new procedure or can seek further training before instituting it; whether time, space, and money are at hand or can be obtained.

As the practitioner—the teacher—tests the research ideas and results which come to him against the measures of desirability and feasibility, he will adopt some ideas and reject others. He will recognize that some research results may be universally true, but he will hold tight to the conviction that all universals must be tested against the particular. This the research specialist can collaborate in doing, but cannot do alone. It can be done only with the help of the practitioner, who is a specialist in the particular. At the same time, the practitioner must be aware of his limitations. He

cannot test the validity of a research result in general.

### Voice of the People

In my observation, few persons would deny that effective planning and direction of school programs require the collaboration of the research specialist and the professional practitioner. Each has his special, his essential contribution to make. But more have difficulty in finding an appropriate part for the third voice—the voice of the people.

The phrase, “the voice of the people,” is clearly hyperbole. In actuality, it can never mean more than the voice of some of the people. The satisfied, the disinterested, the timid, are seldom heard. Even those teachers who covet the participation of the “people” in planning school programs have difficulty in separating carping from constructive criticism, and minor annoyances from major distress. But regardless of difficulty, the voice of the people must be blended with the other two if a constructive program, adequately supported, is to develop. The significance of the people is administratively recognized by the establishment of lay boards of education to govern school programs. So far as I know, no one has suggested that these boards be abolished. But there is some belief that these boards are insufficient, by themselves, to speak for the people, and other means, such as parent-teacher organizations, have been added. But these, too, often seem inadequate to the task of providing an effective way by which the people can be heard in the kind of educational planning that defines and supports the scope and content of school programs. The

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**WILLIAM J. MCGLOTHLIN** is associate director for Regional Programs, Southern Regional Education Board, Atlanta, Georgia.

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question remains—"What is the appropriate part for the people?"

The "people" have many characteristics, but, in the sense used here, the people have the common characteristic of being nonprofessional, ordinarily unfamiliar with research or professional experience, prone to answer calls for innovation with worn statements like, "We didn't used to do it that way," or "I know what I like," or "It goes against common sense." Any professional—research specialist or practitioner—can controvert these statements in many cases where they are applied. In spite of this, the statements do suggest the contribution the people can add, if actively sought in a systematic way.

For the people, in my view, provide a third necessary test, a test by community experience, which is quite different from a test by professional experience, be it supplied by research specialist or practitioner. A test by professional experience may be a test in which the party at interest is invited to serve as judge. It may ignore or underemphasize other than professional values. A test by community experience, if actively sought in a systematic way, can judge the proposal by experience ("We didn't used to do it that way"), by the values of individuals in the community ("I know what I like"), and by a distillation of the two ("common sense"). If tested in this way, some ideas validated by research and approved by professional experience will be rejected by community experience and values. Others will survive even this final test. And, fortunately, some ideas which are initially rejected may be accepted later upon further test by community experience.

The people test for desirability and for feasibility, much as the practitioner does. The framework against which they judge

desirability is different, however, and they have the happy ability to help create feasibility *if* their judgment on desirability is favorable. They can withhold support if they consider the change undesirable, but they can often supply the means of executing the ideas which they consider desirable. And they can and should provide a broader judgment of what is desirable than can the practitioner, whose professional outlook is properly specialized.

Each of the three voices, or to drop the metaphor, each of the three groups, has its peculiar contribution to make to sound school programs. The research specialists provide ideas, validated by their research, and thus stimulate change. The practitioners test the research ideas against their professional experience and undertake the arduous job of application in particular situations. The people test against their community experience, and provide the support that is necessary to maintain the applications. Each has contributions to make. But each has limitations to recognize.

The research specialist can validate ideas through a research methodology, but he can never determine whether application in all particular situations is desirable or feasible. The practitioner can define whether the change is desirable and feasible in a particular situation up to the point of defining the amount of public support the change may elicit, but the practitioner cannot determine the scientific validity of the idea in situations which are beyond his experience. The people can determine whether the application of the research idea is desirable and feasible in light of community experience and values, but they cannot determine either the scientific validity of the idea or whether it is technically desirable or feasible in a school program.

Each group has its contributions. Each has its limitations.

I've talked about the three groups as if each operated in isolation from the other. Obviously, they do not. The flow, however, of ideas and change tends to be from research to application to community, with each succeeding group more resistant to change than the preceding. But the flow can be, and sometimes is, in reverse, from people to practitioner, and from practitioner to research specialist, where ideas created from hunch or particular observation can be tested for scientific validity. The fact of flow suggests the need for collaboration, and systematic collaboration at that. For the research specialist must transfer his results to the practitioner if these findings are to have any chance of application, and the practitioner must be able to transfer his conclusions to the people if the people are to have the opportunity to support them in program changes. The practitioner is the interpreter of research as well as the means of application.

If communication is broken at any of the points between groups, the possibility of developing and maintaining sound programs with constant advances in effectiveness may disappear. Communication between groups must be actively sought in a systematic way. Casual, intermittent efforts will not be sufficient. The research specialist tends to retire to his study. The people have many concerns. The burden for cultivating communication in both directions seems to fall on the practitioners—the teachers, the principals, the supervisors and the superintendents. They must work at this job as hard as they work at other jobs.

They must help the other two groups improve their ability to communicate their ideas, their desires and their hopes.

Many school systems are aware of the need for stimulating participation of the people. For example, a recent study of the Atlanta, Georgia, school system recommended a number of major changes in the administrative organization of the city's schools.<sup>1</sup> It strongly proposed that the Board of Education establish systematic ways of obtaining the advice of the people on policy questions. The study group said:

The Study Council recommends that deliberate efforts be made to foster a two-way exchange of communication between school and community.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, it is recommended that a Citizens Advisory Council be established at the School Board level. Elsewhere in this report, the organization of area advisory committees is proposed . . .<sup>2</sup>

The Atlanta Board of Education has begun to establish the Citizens Advisory Council and area committees. Through them and other councils and committees, the Board and its staff will actively seek the participation of the people in a systematic way. The Board expects to move forward, then, with assurance that innovations suggested by research will be tested by its teachers and by its public, and that those adopted will be desirable and feasible.

<sup>2</sup> Even the most elaborate system for distributing information through annual reports and broadcast does not tap the knowledge and wisdom of the people.

<sup>1</sup> *Schools for Atlanta's Future*. Atlanta, Ga.: Board of Education, 1955. The study was prepared by the Atlanta School Study Council, composed of John E. Ivey, Jr., *chairman*; Walter A. Anderson; Daniel R. Davies; John H. Fischer; and R. L. Johns.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

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