Curriculum Research

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Backing Into a Problem of Curriculum Change

EARLY IN May of 1951, a group of 80 persons spent three days in Nashville planning a broad program designed to improve the preparation of educational administrators. Professors of school administration in colleges and universities in the southeastern states comprised the majority of the group. Superintendents and principals, State Department of Education leaders, sociologists and psychologists made up the remainder of the group. The conference initiated a continuous and sustained effort to develop better college and university training programs for persons who plan to specialize in educational administration. The conference started one phase of the Southern States Cooperative Program in Educational Administration. The group remains active and is continuing not only its efforts toward the original objective, but also the pursuit of objectives identified as desirable by interim research.

The program which grew out of this meeting includes research, experimentation and group study in the field of educational administration. It provided for the investigation of the kinds of personal characteristics associated with success in school administration, community forces impinging on the school program and the character of desirable preparation programs.

Five years of effort by the group produced what has come to be known as the Competency Pattern. Stated simply the pattern is a criterion of effective administrative behavior. It delineates the job of the school administrator as a Gestalt of three elements: task, theory and know-how. It consists primarily of a description of behavioral patterns associated with successful school administration.

As frequently happens in research, the completion of the criterion proved to be merely a first step. It brought the group face to face with questions broached by their findings. How much better were the programs of preparation in institutions represented by the personnel of the group as a result of the five year effort? Had the group been able to feed back into their training programs the insights that were emerging from their research? In what ways had the creation of the Competency Pattern changed its creators? Had they been able to internalize their experiences to a degree which enhanced their competence as professors and administrators?

The search for satisfactory answers to these perplexing questions involved the group in an intensive analysis and eventual acceptance of an organismic and perceptual theory of behavior. In this frame of reference it became clear to them that the Competency Pattern remained largely external to those who had created it. It tended to be an end in itself. It was an impressive document. Members of the group enjoyed producing it. They learned to work well with

each other. In fact, they developed an esprit de corps seldom achieved. Nevertheless, the question remained: How much change had they actually wrought in the programs for which they were responsible? Investigation revealed that limited basic change had occurred. They, therefore, bent their efforts to the task of translating the Competency Pattern into a curriculum which would foster the development of individuals who could perform according to the criterion.

At first, the task seemed elementary. It was simply a matter of redesigning the course structure. Just divide the pattern into logical areas and develop a course around each area. A few changes of this kind made members of the group painfully aware that new courses did not necessarily mean a new program. They saw that the problem was essentially one of the professor's developing new perceptions of himself and his job. They

came to realize that the professor in a very real sense *is* the preparation program. Thus, a curriculum problem into which the group had backed now became a problem of changing individuals. After five years of effort the group had reached the core of the problem of improving the training of school administrators.

Helping People Change

This experience supports certain generalizations which seem to be significant for any kind of effort designed to help people change. They, therefore, would appear to have particular relevance for changes inherent in effective curriculum development. Among these are:

1. The function of purpose is critical in any basic change, particularly that which involves people. This seems so obvious that it is almost trite. Unfortunately, it too often stands as a forest that cannot be seen though trees are be-

ing telled. Apparently for many the articulation of purpose appears to be a difficult and frustrating experience. Yet it is a vital one, since no intelligent choices can be made except on the basis of clearly perceived purpose. The futility of effort based on any assumption which minimizes or ignores the role of purpose should be evident. However, since it is much easier to dwell on tangible things, to manipulate courses and credit hours, than it is to bring one's self to a clarification of why the activity is important, we frequently tend to eschew consideration of or ignore the intangible yet cogent purpose behind it. For this reason, the concern for curriculum change too often confines itself to externals, stopping short of the really basic factors. It would appear that purpose bears a twofold significance for curriculum changes. First, it is a key factor in helping a person clarify what he thinks and believes. Second, it is a compelling force in fostering the development of unity in a group. It appears that purpose is a far more powerful cohesive force in binding a group together than a skillful executive armed with rules of parliamentary procedure or an "efficient" organization.

2. The only purpose which can command the unstinting allegiance of a person is one which he conceives for himself. Purpose externally induced can at best stimulate perfunctory and transitory responses. In any program of curriculum development, therefore, the ends being sought are intensely personal ones —unique. The ostensibly "common" purposes motivating the group are subject to the individual interpretation of each group member who acts in terms of his own perceptions. This does not imply that the individual in his attempt to conceive and articulate his purposes must be abandoned to his own devices. He can

receive effective help in his effort. It would appear to be a critical responsibility of both leadership and teaching to assist members of a group to identify not only alternative means for achieving goals, but the goals themselves.

3. The function of resources, therefore, is basically to assist people in the clarification of purpose and in carrying out activities or programs of work designed to achieve their purposes. The kinds of resources needed within this context and how they are used become highly important. It seems apparent from what has already been said that one of their more obvious functions would be to help individuals to change their perceptions.

4. In light of the above generalizations, the function of structure or organization assumes proportions somewhat different from those usually delineated. It would appear that the function of structure is to provide the means of using resources effectively, of communicating with facility and of discharging responsibilities adequately. Ideally, it would seem that structure is evolved by a group as it moves toward the achievement of its purposes. It is functional and, therefore, flexible. It facilitates change. It does not inhibit it.

5. There is no curriculum change unless the individuals involved in it change. They cannot change unless their perceptions change. Thus, concern for purpose, freedom to develop one's own purposes, provision and proper use of the "right" resources and structure are implicit in this concept.

6. Change affects the whole person. The interpretation of the organismic theory of behavior implied here places great emphasis on the dynamic character of people. It vigorously rejects the notion that consideration of the whole person is possible in installments. It has studious regard for the fact that the person is a whole at each and every moment of all his experiences, that a change in one aspect of his make-up inevitably works change in other aspects.

No claim to originality is made in presenting these generalizations. It is claimed, however, that members of the SCPEA group evolved unique perceptions for themselves and made experimental applications of these. The very articulation of these generalizations provides some evidence of the group's growth over the past seven years since these are not the kinds of concerns to which they addressed themselves in 1951. The fact that many members of the group are continuing to test the validity of these insights seems to insure that growth will continue.

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