Teacher Participation in Meeting Some of the Problems of Double Sessions

Lasting solution to such problems as double sessions, crowded classes and scarce materials can be achieved only through action by the wider community.

The school system in which I teach has been on double session ever since the school population passed the first 100 children, which is about 10 years now. At present, approximately 7,000 children in kindergarten through the third grade are on a shortened schedule. What kinds of problems do double sessions present? How can teachers participate in solving such problems? How does participation preserve teacher sanity, let alone sustain morale? Surprisingly, double sessions have value in that they practically require teacher participation, whereas single sessions are less desperate in their demands.

A strange conversation took place the other noon between two kindergarten teachers who share the same room. "I found the trainman’s head," said one.

"Oh, good. I found the tree trunk yesterday—under the piano," said the other. "Now a smokestack is missing."

"Don’t worry. I’ll look for it this afternoon."

Searching for lost parts to puzzles is a helping teacher.

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Of course, not solely associated with the sharing of a room, but the problem becomes intensified where, in our kindergartens, four sessions, totaling over 120 children and two teachers, must live in a single room and share everything from the teacher’s desk, tables, chairs, coat hooks, bulletin boards and scissors to pet ducks and rabbits. A shared room, to function smoothly, requires a high order of shared responsibility; and, although the degree of one’s responsibility is related, to some extent, to the personality of the individual, it is also true that one is more likely to take care of and feel responsibility for those materials which he has had a part in choosing, and the greater the part, the greater the responsibility.

In the school where the foregoing conversation took place, kindergarten teachers take a major part in preparing the kindergarten yearly budget. They know the amount they have to spend, they consider capital outlay, instructional materials, and all other classroom needs. Over several years’ time they have become avid catalog collectors, yearly visitors to equipment and school supply houses and efficient budgeteers. They
have found that by taking care of materials which they receive, such as puzzles, there is money the next year for items they have long wished for. Thus, responsibility in purchasing equipment leads to responsibility in using and caring for equipment. This is indeed a matter for consideration for any single session school systems that do not so involve their teachers. It has also been noted in our double session grades that teacher participation in the selection of classroom materials has arrested any tendency toward mass teaching; i.e., it has led to greater individualization of programs for children.

Making Adjustments

Another way in which teacher participation in overcoming double session problems of shared rooms came about was through teachers’ presence on planning committees for new schools. The first schools built were optimistically planned as single session schools. Then teachers, with some dismay, began to realize that it might be a long time before the wave of children would slacken. Thus, teacher pressure on their representatives on building committees of the new schools began to show results. For example, larger tack board areas were allowed so that a greater proportion of display space is available for 60 children. As storage has been a tremendous problem for the double session, the new schools have many more shelves, cabinets, and bookcases. In addition, provision has been made for a small compartment for each child in the coat area. Since even his desk must be shared, this arrangement has given the child a sense of something that is his own.

Another problem arose, a problem of a different nature, when teachers who work the split session found that a four hour stretch, without a break, was extremely exhausting. This problem, presented at a staff meeting, was discussed by teachers of both sessions with the principal. The result was a mutual exchange. Now, the morning teachers have a snack period at the same time their children do, but away from them; and the afternoon teachers get a break while the morning teachers have a snack with their children. Since morning teachers remain at school until two o’clock anyway, and afternoon teachers arrive at ten, their day is not lengthened.

The values received have been threefold. The teacher, refreshed, returned to her class, to teach with renewed vigor and a brighter spirit. The “relief” teacher came to know the other’s children, and in the casual exchange of information and comments about the children, the teacher often gained greater insights into her own children. Further, the fact that this was discussed and agreed upon as policy involved the principal’s support in carrying out the decision. Had it only been talked about and then left to each teacher to follow through on, some would have failed to do so. This would only have created small resentments, and in the end, no action would have resulted, and the problem would still have been present.

Whenever double sessions are created, it is usually because there is not enough tax money to build sufficient schools, or schools fast enough. Another urgent reason is, quite often, there are also not enough materials and supplies. Twice as many children are placed in a room, but not twice as many books. There is hardly a teacher on double session in our schools who is not interrupted several times a week, if not daily, by someone who wants to borrow books. Or, the teacher gets ready to begin to read with some chil-
dren and finds that all the books she was using the day before are gone, the teacher of the other session having lent them, or someone, in desperation, having taken them. Surely no one would expect that two teachers, just because they share the same room, would have need for the exact same number of books, or even the same books. Nor does what averages out on paper to be enough books come out that way when applied to the needs of boys and girls in school, let alone taking any home to read as is so often done in well-supported single session schools.

Gradually, through every means possible, including teacher recommendations from the curriculum committees on which they participate, an increasing supply of books is reaching the classrooms; but even so, the solution to this problem is not an easy one. It involves desperate measures, an extraordinary budget allotment for books, or extraordinary clerical measures to manage the supply. The answer, quite clearly, lies in the elimination of double sessions, since the amount of teacher participation in such a matter would have to be unusual to have even a slight effect.

Although two teachers may share the same room, they often have little opportunity to share ideas and plan together for living in the same room. They may meet only as one is leaving and the other beginning his day. Even the faculty meetings must be held separately. Lack of opportunity to meet together had become such a problem to the double session staff at one school that they asked if there wasn’t some way that they could occasionally meet together. Heretofore, the only joint meetings were monthly ones held in the evening before P.T.A., and this included some 25 intermediate grade teachers who were not on double session. As one teacher expressed it, “It seems like such a silly duplication and waste of time for a group of teachers to discuss a problem already discussed by another group as though it had not been discussed.”

As a result of this request, the monthly faculty meetings have been revised and now the part-time teachers meet together for a portion of each meeting. One group of third grade teachers solved their particular need to meet together by moving some chairs into the hall during the regular school session. The classroom doors were all open, the children were studying, still under the watchful eyes of their teachers, and the teachers were conferring with their colleagues of the other session. This was only an emergency solution. There is no real substitute to finding an adequate and proper meeting time to consider problems together. To many problems associated with double sessions there are no satisfactory solutions, regardless of the degree or quality of teacher participation!

There are many problems which only a return to a single session can solve, for example: the shortened day, with the ever present cry, “There is not enough time to get everything in”; and inherent in this, the usually subconscious, but nevertheless present, tendency to put more pressure on children younger and younger to achieve in academic areas, thereby creating an imbalance between the tool subjects and the creative arts; and, to some degree, an emphasis on homework out of proportion to the readiness of the child for learning—all because the day is so short!

Similarly, teachers feel frustrated because even though they want to have a room ready for children, notes on the chalkboard to greet them, a new display

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on the science table, all these seem nearly impossible when you cannot work in your own room because it is always occupied. And for children, it is hard to share when you have never had anything that is your own!

So, although we work together to solve what we can, quite clearly, intelligent, dedicated, professionally minded teachers can only accomplish so much, no matter how much participation occurs in the solving of double session problems. Such teacher participation has many values whether schools work on single, double or triple shifts. Perhaps its greatest value can be that the continuing crises of zooming school population may force a degree of democratization upon schools which might not otherwise occur. But lasting solution to such problems is beyond the confines of the school building and of the professional realm in which teachers must actively participate. Only through action by the wider community, by all of the people, can adequate means be provided to achieve and maintain the kind of schools we need for the children we teach.

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of science contain valuable stimuli for fresh thinking about curriculum problems; and
(c) Specialists in curriculum theory could help by developing a rationale for both theoretical and operational problems in the field.

Underlying these major points is the idea that scientific concepts and methods can provide the bases for thinking about curriculum problems. This is an hypothesis rather than an assumption. As an hypothesis, the idea can lead to significant questions. As an assumption it will lead only to trite and insignificant controversies. There is too much at stake for us to be content with the latter.
—Ruth M. Larson, research assistant and instructor, Ohio Wesleyan University, Delaware, Ohio.

References


