

Wings Over Our Shoulders

Problem points sometimes arise as staff members participate in a curriculum improvement program. The author shows that growth can occur as these problems are worked through.

" . . . All that I thought was good was not good. My self-image changed. The situation was clear; only a change could be the answer. I had to change. How? Insecurity! Frustration! A searching within!"

" . . . Throughout the entire year I had moments of depression when I wondered if the program was really working—wondered if this were a better way"

" . . . My feelings have been from one extreme to the other. At times the dregs of bitterness could not be worse. At other times I have caught myself looking over my shoulder to see if 'wings' were beginning to show"

" . . . It seemed to me that we were actually treading on new soil and I love adventure. It seemed that I was a partner in making a new contribution to the world"

THESE ARE teachers speaking—teachers who participated in an in-service study that resulted in rather dramatic changes in curriculum. This curriculum improvement program is on-going and this report presents a view-at-a-point-in-process.

Setting for the Study

This study is district-wide. It involves the staff of two high schools, one junior high school and seven elementary schools. Four of the elementary schools are nine- to twelve-teacher schools and

three are two- to three-teacher schools. There are 107 teachers in the system. The secondary principals teach one period each day. In the three larger elementary schools the principals have full-time supervisory and administrative schedules. In the three smaller schools the principals teach full time. In the intermediate-size school the principal spends part time teaching and part time supervising. The Central Office Administration curriculum staff consists of the superintendent and a curriculum coordinator who works with both secondary and elementary schools. A consultant from the State University works with administrators and teachers in the in-service program.

The school system serves a semi-rural area in which the major industries are iron mining, cattle raising, and providing tourist accommodations.

Basic Assumptions

The approach to the in-service study is based on assumptions about how curriculum is *really* changed. One basic assumption is that change in curriculum requires change in people—administrators and teachers. A second assumption is that changing people is a complex process that may require a kind of total re-organization of the self—a process that demands time and effort on the part of those who change. A third assumption

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is that an action research program is an effective way to change curriculum practices.

Ways of Working

The in-service curriculum study has two major phases. In the beginning, the language arts area was the focus for change. For one year each teacher and administrator worked on an individual action research problem developed around a specific language arts objective of particular interest to him. Research in group dynamics indicates that group work is more effective in producing change than are individual effort and activity. Accordingly, at the beginning of the second year the study moved into the cooperative action research phase. The cooperative research centered in any curriculum area of concern to the group. Several different organizational patterns emerged. Some work-study groups included the entire faculty; other groups cut across school lines and involved teachers from two or more schools; some groups were organized within one faculty. In this study cooperative action research continues to be the major approach to effecting change in classroom practices.

Problem Points in Staff Participation

The purpose of this article is to point out problem points which may arise when a staff participates in an in-service curriculum improvement program. A look at just a sampling of problem points may help schools or districts engaged in a similar study hold more realistic expectations for work-study groups.

The Changing Self-Image

One of the most challenging problem points in staff participation in curricu-

lum development is how to work with people who begin to see themselves in a new light. When an individual glimpses what his behavior and role should be and senses where he is in relation to the desired behavior he frequently experiences a kind of shock. This is almost a traumatic experience for a sensitive person. Feelings of inadequacy, of insecurity, of guilt over past behavior well up in the individual. He may see himself as not a worth-while person, as a failure in his work; he may despair of finding the know-how and of possessing the strength to reach the new goal. These feelings may generate resentment, hostility and negativism toward the study itself and toward the people in leadership roles. The depth of these feelings is illustrated in these responses of teachers:

"My feelings during this experience were a mixture of failure and success—mostly failure. Sometimes I felt I was succeeding quite well and I was sure it was paying big dividends and then some little (or big it seemed) incident would bog me down in anxiety and insecurity. At one time I seriously considered resigning."

"As I gained insight, frustrations grew. I cried. I couldn't sleep. I talked with my fellow-teachers and my supervisor. I taught and evaluated and cried."

"This year was a year of heartaches and frustrations. Many times I felt I couldn't go on, but the support given to me by my superintendent and supervisor gave me courage to keep going."

"I realized how completely inadequate I was. There were terrific feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. . . . It would have been very easy during the first year and a half of our study to have left the profession and felt very good about it."

Staff members in this study who demonstrate deep behavioral change seem to experience and work through this kind of reality-testing. It appears imperative that someone be on hand in

these situations who can give solid support and encouragement.

Giving Recognition and Praise

A problem point in staff participation is giving adequate and just recognition and praise to individuals and groups for their efforts and achievements. The ineptness of local leaders and of the outside consultant in giving recognition and praise results in accusations of favoritism and unfairness. On a few occasions interpersonal antagonisms reach an explosive high. The perceptions of some members of one work group indicate how serious this problem can be:

"Deep and lasting frustrations came from what I thought was unjust reward and (this) has not been entirely cleared up."

"My greatest disappointment came when we found that one individual was going to reap the reward and was receiving help that wasn't shared with the group."

"The consultant must be very aware of human feelings and differences and he must have the welfare of the group at heart above any personal or ulterior motive."

Unless rapport is established that enables these kinds of feelings to be put on the table where they can be examined, the curriculum study may literally explode. In this district-wide study those in leadership roles are not as creative as they need to be in developing ways and means to give praise and recognition to staff members who are making innovations in curriculum practices. Staff members also find it difficult to encourage and support each other as they work side by side in developing new approaches to learning.

Securing Involvement

Change requires involvement. A problem point in this study is securing involvement of all teachers. Something more than lukewarm commitment is needed to carry on curriculum experi-

mentation and evaluation. Individual differences are a reality in teacher—as well as student—groups. There appears to be a difference in personality structure of participants. Some are quite receptive to change, others resist change. Though, from the observer's point of view, the environment and the socio-psychological climate seem to be the same for the members of a work-group, individuals respond quite differently. Some evidences of non-involvement are:

A feeling that the problem is forced upon participants

A feeling of negativism and depression throughout the study

A feeling of need to get on with the more important work of giving assignments and hearing lessons

A feeling that the results are to benefit someone in a status or leadership role.

In working with all of the teachers in a district in a change program, greater attention must be given to what triggers the individual to want to change, and to creating the kind of environment in which each teacher may find challenges and invitations to at least try something different.

Anticipating Rhythm in Group Work

Because there is quite a wide range in the degree of involvement of individuals, groups do not move in the direction of the change goal at the same rate. With respect to the same change goal, some teachers have made the innovation a confirmed practice; others are in the data-gathering, trial stage; others have made only slight effort to inaugurate the change; others have made no attempt to implement the practice in the classroom. For example, in the area of record keeping, about 38 percent of the teachers make a confirmed practice of assessing and recording pupils' feelings about facets of the school program; about 20 percent are in the trial stage—testing

and experimenting; about 18 percent have made sporadic efforts; 20 percent have not attempted to assess how pupils feel about methods or practices currently used in the school.

Since there are many work groups operating at different stages, the district-wide study progresses with an uneven or broken front. There are times when the project appears to move forward quite rapidly and there are times when the project appears to move little or not at all.

This rhythm in group work is observable not only in the "horizontal" advancement toward the change goal, but also in the "vertical" movement of entire groups. Even in task-oriented groups there are "highs" and "lows." All participants may be more comfortable if they are helped to understand this phenomenon and to analyze the factors that contribute to the highs and lows. Unless this rhythmic pattern is anticipated there may be a tendency for individuals and groups to give up when they reach a low.

Factors identified in this study which contribute to the highs are:

Children's positive responses to the change practice

The analyzing and interpreting of evidence collected by the group

The implementation of new concepts and ideas presented by the consultant or found in current literature

The specific helps that pave the way for next steps

Progress toward the change-goal that could be measured objectively.

Factors contributing to the lows are:

Negative interpersonal feelings that develop within the work-group

Lack of understanding and insight regarding goals and purposes of the study

Too great expectations regarding the rate at which change occurs

Feelings of being bogged down, of being overworked, burdened

A shift in the focus of the problem or project—following tangents.

Keeping Channels of Communication Open

Another problem point in this in-service study is keeping participants informed about what is happening in the district and providing opportunities for individuals and groups to share experiences. Attempts to keep communication channels open include:

Written communications which list the problems being studied and the names of the work-group personnel

Written communications that feed back to individuals and groups crucial findings as these emerge

District-wide sharing conferences which provide opportunities to exchange ideas, to learn from each other, to discover that people who are experimenting have similar feelings and problems

Workshops at strategic points in the school year which are designed to build and to strengthen a common philosophy in the district and which provide an opportunity to examine and evaluate findings from the total project

The consultants become the liaison in projects in the district because they work with all study groups. They carry ideas and helps from one group to another.

The focus in this article is on problem points in staff participation in a curriculum improvement program. Consequently, it may seem to have a negative overtone. In fairness to the project and to the administrators and teachers participating in it, it must be said that most of these problems have been worked through satisfactorily. The in-service study is effecting sound and exciting changes in classroom practices. An assessment of change indicates that to this point 108 classroom practices in 12 curriculum areas have been studied. Sometimes an existing practice has been extended or otherwise modified and sometimes a new practice has been intro-

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was considered to be the opposite of this pattern. No principal in the study operated democratically more than 70 percent of the time and no principal failed to operate democratically at least 30 percent of the time. Thus the comparison was between the effect of relatively more democratic behavior and more autocratic behavior of principals. Sugg found that in schools with more democratic principals: teachers were more ready for curriculum change, were not threatened as much by change and were making more changes in their work; more courses were modified and more changes were made in school services, daily schedules and guidance procedures. On the basis of Sugg's research, it would seem that if a principal hopes to carry on a program of continuous curriculum change he should involve the faculty in the decision making.

Needless to say, change does not mean improvement. Judgments concerning the quality of the change depend upon values held by the individuals making the judgment.

The evidence from these studies leads

to the conclusion that participation of the faculty in decision making will result in higher morale, maintenance of interest and willingness to change, but does not guarantee that the changes will be more intelligent or improve the program. Whether improvement is made will be determined by the quality of the group problem solving process used. Securing participation is not enough.

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duced. Changes in staff members are evident. Some of the most promising changes are:

The experimental attitude and behavior of teachers

The increased insight and understanding of teachers and administrators regarding the way children learn

The new role which teachers demonstrate as they work with children

The increased objectivity on the part of

teachers as they work with their own data

The increased interest in professional reading materials

The use of educational principles as a basis for answering questions and making decisions.

Though the problem points are real and at times most discouraging, more and more we are experiencing days when we look over our shoulders "to see if wings are beginning to show."

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