

# Curriculum Research

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## Getting Started on a Curriculum Research Project

*NOTE:* The purpose of this article is to give a blow by blow description of how a piece of research begins to get under way. It also tries to report some of the problems involved in setting up a problem by members of a school staff.

In the process of describing the above some generalizations are developed which may be of value to others interested in involving teachers in curriculum research.

Although a genuine attempt is made by the writers to be objective the following necessarily represents the perception of only two persons.

. . .

A SCHOOL district located near a university had been concerned for several years about the problem of more adequate provision for individual differences among students. The administration of the school revised some course offerings, established a type of homogeneous grouping, and altered certain course content, sequence and continuity. A manual, known as the "Classification Manual," was written to explain local homogeneous grouping policies. It was recognized after the second year of this project that the teachers' understanding and acceptance of these changes were

not equivalent to the administration's hopes.

At this point university assistance was requested by the administration. A one-quarter, graduate seminar in secondary curriculum problems was arranged with a university instructor serving as chairman and consultant. Enrollment in this seminar was restricted to 18 people. Fifteen people enrolled, about 50 percent administrators and 50 percent teachers.

After the first meeting, the chairman (university instructor) attempted to gather together purposes as expressed by the seminar members and the school administration. These main purposes were to:

1. Analyze, discuss and experiment with ways of improving instruction in the classroom through more adequate provision for individual differences
2. Clarify understanding of the administration's "Classification Manual"
3. Give attention to theoretical and philosophical issues related to individual differences among students
4. Develop recommendations for the initiation of a more effective plan for providing for individual differences at the junior high school level. Changes, modifications or elaboration of the "Classification Manual" were expected.

To achieve these purposes a major portion of time during the quarter was spent in: discussing opinions and attitudes about the problem of individual differences, the organization and structure of the school program, the curriculum as it existed and the power structure in the local situation; gathering evidence on how students are different and what provision teachers are making for these differences; strengthening communication among seminar members.

Two methods of gathering data were especially effective:

1. Making a survey of faculty attitudes toward grouping
2. Interviewing a number of teachers for descriptions of the way they were identifying and handling differences among students.

There was detailed analysis and discussion of the survey and the reports of classroom teachers. Gradually the group members developed more ability to discuss with freedom most aspects of the problem. There developed, too, a respect for differences in opinion. The members became quite verbal in their distaste for autocratic administrative policies, extensive administrative memoranda, teacher resistance to change, etc.

The group attained a fairly high degree of solidarity; for example, there was unanimous agreement by the group that something *had* to be done about individual differences.

The above solidarity yielded an atmosphere which can best be defined as a "honeymoon" effect, (i.e., good group spirit, we-feeling, and appreciation of common problems) despite salary, status and opinion differences. The group established many common feelings and attitudes; however, only some of these were related to the problem at hand. Many

such feelings were due to the acceptance of similar positive and negative attitudes on methods of operation, philosophy, and personalities. To this point thoughts and opinions expressed on the problem were more theoretical than practical. Attempts to translate theory into action were usually fraught with indecision and frustration. Continued frustration was reduced by finding tangents or more comfortable topics.

To the chairman it seemed that a lack of discussion skills and an awareness of process were problems which blocked progress. In order to foster some thinking and reflection, the chairman suggested that a group observer be brought in. The group seemed to recognize the validity of the observer's analysis on group participation, inability to stay on the topic, and subgroup alignments of seminar members. However, the group showed little perceptible change in behavior as a result of his observations. Apparently the group was not ready to do more than verbalize on its process.

Toward the end of the quarter the group recognized that attempts to develop a research project to experiment on the problem of individual differences were confronted by:

1. Apathy, indifference, or resistance to change
2. Difficulty in altering administrative-teacher relationships in order to develop productive working relationships
3. Conflicts between ideas and vested interest or power groups
4. A lack of effective communication
5. Inability to translate agreed upon theory into practice.

The accomplishments for the quarter were:

Establishment of a positive group atmosphere

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Willingness to verbalize many aspects of the problem

Better administration-teacher relationship for those involved

The development of some clarity as to what a research-oriented proposal is.

Seminar members agreed that an extension of the seminar for another quarter would enable completion of some definite proposals to present to the administration. A second quarter of this seminar was arranged.

#### A Second Quarter

Approximately half the seminar members chose to continue for a second quarter. The favorable comments on the first quarter's work resulted in a registration of 25 people.

There were quite naturally some differences between seminar members who had worked together for a quarter and the collection of people who comprised

the new group. But after a brief review of the first quarter's achievements and frustrations, work proceeded, seemingly more rapidly and at a higher level of sophistication than was evident during the first quarter. It was apparent that a good deal had been communicated informally, outside of the seminar, to new members.

The seminar members concerned themselves with action steps to:

1. Revise the administration's "Classification Manual" (a duplicate of the first quarter proposal)

2. Develop proposals which would put into practice theories developed on individual differences

3. Appraise and report on research evidence on grouping

4. Organize a research design for measuring effects of homogeneous grouping in each of several subject areas

5. Obtain opinion and ideas from all participating teachers and students on homogeneous grouping in general, and on the courses in which such grouping should be tried.

The group's size made total group discussion less productive than during the first quarter. Small groups were initiated on topics of interest which included all of the action steps above.

As a result of the second quarter's work four groups presented concrete, research-oriented proposals, for submission to the administration:

1. Expressed a need for verification of any system of grouping tried
2. Recognized the necessity for in-service education for teachers in new procedures
3. Recommended a review of present selection, continuity, and appropriateness of content
4. Recognized a need for more attention to the appropriate placement of students in courses and sections
5. Reflected an awareness that there is more involved in teaching than the academic aspects
6. Gained a greater respect for the problems administrators face in scheduling and curriculum organization
7. Recognized the need for better communications in the school system
8. Noted the desirability of identifying teacher competencies and interest in teaching, e.g., some teachers prefer work with superior students, some with lower socioeconomic groups.

The recommendations also indicated:

1. A continued emphasis on textbooks
2. An overemphasis on use of test results
3. Lack of attention to keeping parents informed and participating in curricular change.

Process was slow and often cumbersome but rewarding in that there developed a mutual understanding and a shared commitment for experimentation. Offering the seminar for two quarters provided an opportunity for members to drop out, without loss of face, and permitted new people in sympathy with group goals to join. The procedure yielded recommendations developed and supported by faculty, not imposed by the administration. The failure to apply analysis of process to group methods showed that verbal understanding may not transfer to behavioral skills.

Assistance from an outside university can, and perhaps did, establish a neutral corner to assist in focusing on problems more than on personalities. It may also carry with it the implicit necessity for facing problems on a rational basis. And, of course, it permits drawing in additional resources which would not otherwise be available.

A university representative cannot easily transfer the responsibility for action on proposals unless there is continued support and excellent communication with the administration. The freedom an outsider can permit may also develop values and goals not acceptable in the local school district which may further complicate or block transfer. For this situation an assessment of action steps is not yet timely.

The most significant outcomes for curriculum research were a recognition that innovations need to be tested, and the beginning of a feeling of respectability with experimentation, whether it verifies or negates one's own point of view.

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