

## ASCD's Role in Curriculum Experimentation

WHAT is the role of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development as to curriculum experimentation? While no official statement of policy as to this has been judged necessary, it is safe to say that the membership essentially conceives the role of the organization and its members as twofold. One dimension as to curriculum experimentation is service as encourager of experimentation, facilitator of local, state and national curriculum programs, translator of outstanding ideas and insights, disseminator of the winnowed best. A second role of the Association (and, more especially, a role played by individual members because of the nature of their work) might well be described as the role of gatekeeper. By gatekeeper, I mean to imply that the membership of the organization occupies strategic places in American education. Through these positions which they hold they influence curriculum decisions made on the local level.

It should be clear that supervisors and curriculum workers of whatever title do not have exclusive control of the

gates in school systems. They share their responsibility with many others, including the basic policy setters—boards of education; the top administrators—the superintendents; the creators of materials—including textbook authors and audio-visual workers; and the vast corps of people who are in daily charge of the learning experiences of children and youth—the teachers. Nor should we imply that the gatekeepers have complete control over the gates. Indeed, in curriculum work, even as at sporting events, there may well be successful gate-crashers! Yet persisting in their responsibilities year by year, as projects, programs, new textbooks, and subsidies come and go, are the specialists in supervision and curriculum development in schools and school systems across the nation.

### Role of Research Disseminator

Let us consider each of these roles in turn. The first role was described essentially as encouragement, facilitation, translation and dissemination of curriculum experimentation. Naturally, the organization plays its role in this respect through publications, meetings and commissions. As one illustration, the ASCD in recent years has encouraged experi-

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mentation through a monthly column and an annual issue of the journal. The 1957 Yearbook, *Research for Curriculum Improvement*, was prepared and published well before the first Sputnik focused national attention on the school curriculum. (In these days of curriculum Johnny-Come-Latelys, one had best define the dates of curriculum emphases, even as politicians date support for their candidate as prior to or subsequent to the national convention, an important distinction!) Essentially, the magazine issues and the yearbook were other milestones in the continuing effort by ASCD to acquaint members with research resulting in curriculum improvement, to help foster research programs, to help the researcher understand his interpersonal relationships, and to bring about the desired culmination of the conduct of research in the school setting.

Characteristically, in the role of disseminator, the ASCD has published such issues of *Educational Leadership* as the December 1959 number, "Projects That Will Influence Instruction." For this issue, Elbert P. Little wrote "PSSC: A Physics Program"; Max Beberman wrote "Improving High School Mathematics Teaching"; M. L. Keedy wrote "Mathematics in Junior High School"; Arnold B. Grobman wrote "Life Sciences in American Schools"; James R. Powers and Simone Oudot wrote "Parlons Français"; and Eugene E. Slaughter wrote "Improving English Teaching."

#### Fostering Experimentation

All conferences of the ASCD contribute to fostering curriculum experimentation. At the 1962 Conference, area meetings will be held on broad fields such as science and mathematics, communica-

EDITOR'S NOTE: William Van Til spoke at the National Conference on Curriculum Experimentation in Minneapolis on September 27, 1961. This conference brought together specialists in academic disciplines who are engaged in curriculum experimentation. Excerpts from Dr. Van Til's talk, addressed primarily to such specialists, have been chosen for their relevance to the work of the ASCD membership.

tions (including language arts and foreign languages), self and society, social studies, physical fitness, and the arts. Each area meeting will be initiated by an educator whose role is essentially that of a middleman between the specialists in subject disciplines and the generalists in professional education. For instance, new science and mathematics horizons will be explored by specialists in science education and mathematics education.

At the second in the series of area meetings, reports of curriculum experimentation, such as The School Mathematics Study Group, the Youth Physical Fitness Program, and the National Task Force in Economic Education, will be heard. In the third sessions there will be reports of local curriculum development experimentation, new patterns of organization, teaching innovations and new instructional materials. In a final summary session, coordinators of these area meetings will talk about relationships among the fields of study in the curriculum. Each series of presentations in area meetings will be commented upon by a continuing panel which will include specialists in the learning process, in the society in which we live, in philosophy of education, and grass roots practitioners of supervision and curriculum development.

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Perhaps the most notable role of the ASCD currently in encouraging curriculum experimentation, as contrasted with its role as disseminator, is represented by the Curriculum Research Institutes, which are jointly sponsored and staffed by ASCD and the National Institute of Mental Health. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development has faith in research carried on by the personnel of local school systems, particularly when these staff members are aided by varied specialists. The first two Curriculum Research Institutes held were focused on helping those in attendance to initiate and conduct cooperative curriculum research. Though this emphasis was never abandoned, by the time of the third Institute consultants also participated in order to review research findings about human learning. Thus, the third and succeeding Institutes combined aid to participants who learned about research techniques and the building of a body of knowledge about the learning process and the individual.

The purposes of a characteristic ASCD Curriculum Research Institute include (a) to translate research findings in the behavioral sciences into educational practices; (b) to stimulate curriculum research and field study in school situations; (c) to expand participants' knowledge of curriculum research design by participating in the designing of research. In addition, there have been specific purposes, such as the 1959-60 attempt to identify areas for research and for field study concerning human variability and learning. This emphasis eventuated in the pamphlet, *Human Variability and Learning*. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development was one of the earliest

organizations to use an interdisciplinary approach in such Institutes. The Institutes have stressed teams from school systems, rather than single individuals. This procedure has been followed in the interest of making a greater impact on return home.

In these days of giant foundation grants, it is interesting to know that the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development has financed the Institutes simply by requiring that each participant pay his own expenses plus a registration fee.

### Role of Gatekeeper

To an audience dedicated to curriculum experimentation in varied subject disciplines, an audience proceeding on highly varied assumptions and characterized by differing approaches to curriculum change, the second role of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and its members may be of highest interest. To understand the gatekeeper role, one must understand the functions of instructional leaders. Gordon N. Mackenzie of Teachers College, Columbia University, Chairman of the ASCD Commission on Instructional Leaders, defined these functions well in *Educational Leadership*, March 1961. He said that supervisors and curriculum workers characteristically carry on at least the following seven major groups of activities: (a) clarification of goals, (b) development of work structure, (c) assistance to individuals, (d) providing resources, (e) communication among staff, (f) coordination of effort, and (g) work with lay citizens.

How does a supervisor or curriculum worker serve as a gatekeeper? Above all, he actually fosters new emphases in curriculum which he believes to be pres-

ently or potentially significant. In other words, one aspect of his role is to originate and initiate. He also serves as a strategic adviser to people who ask his advice on inclusion of new proposals, often national in origination and scope, and now potential for use here at home in Crossroads, USA. For instance, while experimentation goes on through foundations or studies in the varied disciplines, and sometimes after the completion of such experimentation, schoolmen often turn to supervisors and curriculum workers for aid in decision-making as to utilization. Sometimes those who turn for aid are superintendents. Often those seeking advice and varied aids are teachers in the classroom.

#### Examining Proposals

Thus the supervisor or curriculum worker is called upon to examine all new proposals with care. For instance, the characteristic supervisor or curriculum director examines newly proposed emphases against his conception of a proper philosophy of education for American schools. He examines the new proposal against the social realities, the urgent social demands of our times. He studies the new proposal in terms of what he knows about the learner, the learning process, and the needs of children and youth.

As he scrutinizes new proposals, the curriculum worker or the supervisor is quite aware of an old axiom of his profession, that nobody loves a supervisor or a curriculum worker. Even when the supervisor or curriculum worker is on the side of the enthusiast for some aspect of the school program, he is not on his side to the extent the specialist judges necessary. Always the supervisor or curriculum director must be a fol-

lower of Plato, striving for the legendary golden mean, attempting to achieve balance.

Sometimes the supervisor or curriculum worker appears, to the dedicated specialist, to violate "common sense." Perhaps he has learned this role from scientists who tell us that obviously solid matter is not, as common sense describes, actually solid and substantial, but really is a mass of jostling, interacting particles. Admittedly, from a "common sense point of view" this is an outrageous concept.

For instance, a contemporary supervisor or curriculum worker may not be willing to accept supposedly homogeneous grouping into the bright, the average, and the dull which "common sense" endorses as self-evident. Instead, the supervisor or curriculum worker may be heard asking, "What does research say?" Incidentally, research reports indicate that there is, so far, no evidence that ability grouping, taken by itself, leads to improved mastery of subject matter. Studies of grouping show that the low group more often benefits than the high, on whose behalf many grouping approaches are currently being instituted. The supervisor or curriculum worker may be found, too, checking proposals for grouping against the philosophical, social and psychological foundations for decision making upon which he depends. He may emerge, for instance, with reservations as to the long-range societal effects of today's demands by upper-middle class intellectuals, who thoroughly repudiate racial segregation, that segregation by intellect be instituted. The supervisor or curriculum worker may even conclude that less able students may need exactly the reverse of intellectual segregation in order to reach their potentiality in the kind of American society in which we live.

## Improving Understanding

There appears to be one outstanding priority for those who have independently developed varied projects in the disciplines and those who represent professional organizations in education. That priority is the development of mutual understanding among educators whose responsibility it is to live and work daily with the school program and specialists who know well the knowledge and concepts associated with a separate discipline.

We are all now familiar with the split which exists between the scientist and the humanist, of which C. P. Snow writes persuasively in *Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*.<sup>1</sup> But we may be less familiar, or perhaps less concerned, about the equally wide gap between the specialist in disciplines and the educator who fosters the broad instructional program of the schools. At the very least, we need to talk to each other.

Perhaps at the most, we need to work together toward greater coordination of educational resources. Coordination of educational resources, however, should not be mistaken for a national curriculum, standardized, orthodox, identical in all places, a consummation devoutly *not* to be wished.

As a step toward mutual understanding we need humility and a degree of respect for each other rather than the arrogance and disrespect which too often have characterized relationships among professionals who happen to have differing specializations. We need mutual involvement in the developing projects rather than calling upon professional bodies to endorse projects after the fact

<sup>1</sup> Charles P. Snow. *Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*. Cambridge, England: University Press, 1959. p. 51.

and despite lack of real participation in decision-making.

We need close examination of the highly varied assumptions as to how curriculum change comes about, assumptions which have been accepted, sometimes without sufficient examination, by specialists in disciplines who find themselves newly engaged in secondary curriculum work. For instance, at the National Conference on Curriculum Experimentation, in Minneapolis, assumptions as to techniques for curriculum change which were mentioned ranged from preparation of a single textbook for a physics course, through preparation of three possible books for biology courses, through identification of concepts in economics for stress in varied economics and history programs. Some proposals have involved many teachers; others have involved few. Some proposals have used the insights of professional educators; others have bypassed professional educators other than classroom teachers. Proposals for dissemination of new programs have ranged from use of established local and state procedures to advocacy of national establishment of a curriculum for the schools.

As part of genuine coordination, we need recognition among supervisors and curriculum directors that specialists can up-date knowledge and contribute insights as to concepts. Conversely, we need recognition by specialists in disciplines that there exist men and women in American education with experience and insight into the difficult business of curriculum change. These include schoolmen who have learned through experience that effective curriculum change does not come about through edict or by publication of materials alone, as the conventional wisdom of "common sense" too often tends to assume.

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