

Supervision and Action Research

Instruments for growth

EDUCATIONAL organization with its rigidity, its complexity of duty, its monotony of routine, and its tradition of conformity can easily stifle the creative spirit of the dedicated teacher. When this occurs tragedy results, for, since true education is fundamentally a creative process, the teacher who cannot function creatively cannot teach effectively.

There are two resources in the educational set-up which, if used properly, safeguard and develop that individual creative talent which is the essence of effective teaching. Supervision and action research are the two indispensable guardians of teacher growth.

Teacher Attitudes Toward Personal Growth

The supervisor's efforts to help teachers grow is not as difficult as it might seem, for all men are self-oriented. This fact gives sound psychological support to the whole teacher improvement program. To be true to himself a teacher needs and welcomes motivation that is fundamentally intrinsic to personality growth. If a man's yen for self-realization has died, it is foolish to believe that

he can effect any growth in others.¹ The teacher then is more apt to respond to supervisory suggestions that espouse his own development than those which point to some general educational objective.

Teachers frequently resist in-service education programs because these programs often ignore personal needs for growth and emphasize subtly but coldly the teacher's value as a useful unit in the accomplishment of the school's aims. Denied recognition of their intrinsic worth, teachers naturally feel inclined to sabotage organized group effort.² Teachers, like children, tend to be and become themselves sooner and more consistently than they tend to interact with others.³ Unless individual needs are recognized it is useless to talk about group effort.

Certainly the supervisor should not limit himself exclusively to a concern for the teacher's individual needs. Paradoxically enough one of our basic human

¹ Arthur T. Jersild. *When Teachers Face Themselves*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1955. p. 130-31.

² *Ibid.*, p. 115.

³ Lorrene Love Ort. *A Matter of Fences*. Washington, D. C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1963. p. 22.

Mary Nazaire Columbro is Instructor in Education, Supervisor of Student Teachers in English, and a Doctoral Candidate, Ohio State University, Columbus.

needs is the need to interact with others. The challenge of maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships fosters positive personal development. Conversation is itself a highly creative act. The teacher, then, if he is to be truly helped to grow must be given opportunities to deal with others in significant relationships. Burnham and King make a realistic summary of the importance of people in school organization:

Schools consist primarily of people, and the goals of the school are accomplished through the efforts of people, singly and in groups. The activity of individuals involved does not occur in isolation, but in relation to the actions of all the others engaged in the process of education. The behavior of each person is influenced, stimulated, supported, hindered, blocked, extended, approved, ignored, disapproved by others with whom he is interacting in the organization.¹

Part of the supervisor's job, then, is to help teachers grow through more meaningful group interaction. This experience in addition to exercise in personal self-competency will provide a wholesome program of teacher growth. As the supervisor assesses his concept of a well-organized program, he might ask himself if he has understood and communicated his understanding of the following points:

1. Being and becoming oneself is the great aim of education, and indeed of life itself.
2. Teachers are entitled to grow through their work.

¹Reba M. Burnham and Martha L. King. *Supervision in Action*. Washington, D. C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1961. p. 38.

3. Self-improvement is creative action.
4. Teachers who are conscious of self-growth stimulate similar creativity in their students.
5. Teaching cannot improve unless teachers improve.
6. Creativity is the criterion of quality teaching.
7. "Creative teaching is the end goal of modern supervision."²
8. Supervisory action must include provision for both individual and group growth projects.
9. Uniqueness of teachers is a prior and more fundamental value than social competency.
10. "Valuing the uniqueness of each person is basic to a release of creativity."³

If these understandings are functional parts of the supervisor's conceptual theory, he is well-equipped to act as an instrumental cause of teacher growth.

The Supervisor and Action Research

The role of the supervisor in making action research an integral part of the teacher growth effort resolves itself into a number of specific tasks.

Preproject Tasks

The best way to involve teachers in the satisfying process of action research is to demonstrate that this is a means of personal growth. Supervisors who have themselves participated in a variety of projects should use this information in numerous anecdotal ways to communicate both the process and the values of action research.

²Muriel Crosby. *Supervision as Co-operative Action*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957. p. 118.

³Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. *Perceiving, Behaving, Becoming*. Washington, D. C.: the Association, 1962. p. 151.

Professional literature on action research is another means of informing teachers about the method. The following materials, for example, discuss a whole program of individualizing reading and teachers should be supplied with personal copies if they are expected to launch a similar study:

Walter B. Barbe, *Educator's Guide to Personalized Reading Instruction*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1961.

Marcella K. Draper and Louise H. Schwietert, *A Practical Guide to Individualized Reading*. Bureau of Educational Research, City of New York, 1960.

Alice Miel, editor, *Individualizing Reading Practices*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1958.

As these materials are read and then discussed in informal ways for a long period of time, the supervisor should continually point up the personal meaning in experiment and research. Unless teachers understand that the results will change their day-to-day behavior in the classroom, the challenge of personal improvement has been lost. Stephen Corey makes this point:

The study must be undertaken by those who may have to change the way they do things as a result of the studies. Singly and in groups they must use their imagination creatively and constructively to identify the practices that must be changed, courageously try out those practices that give better promise, and methodically and systematically gather evidence to test their worth.⁷

In "selling" action research to the uninitiated, the supervisor must emphasize the fact that the teacher is the *actor* and hence, research has expanded its historical intent of simply adding to

⁷ Stephen Corey, *Action Research To Improve School Practices*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1953. p. 8.

knowledge. Action research is a new and integrated approach to knowledge, an approach that recognizes the objective scientific process of research and the subjective inner experiences of the researcher.⁸

We want a way of holding assumptions about research which makes it possible to integrate the pursuit of science and research with the acceptance and fruitful development of one's self.⁹

If the supervisor can demonstrate the personal values of action research, he has already facilitated his next task, that of creating a climate conducive to open-ended thinking and experimentation. The threat implicit in all untried enterprise can be removed if the supervisor stresses process rather than product, method rather than result. Negative results as well as positive ones should be cherished as important outcomes of a project. So, too, individual projects should receive proportionately as much attention as group efforts. Ronald Doll suggests trying to build a feeling that it is all right to have problems.¹⁰ A final injunction might be for the supervisor to create a climate of unhurried professional effort, one in which teachers are not pressured for results.

Problems that are genuinely valuable to teachers are usually deep-seated, and it is realistic to think they will take time to solve. The supervisor should not "legislate" research investigations; rather he

⁸ Abraham Shumsky, "Learning about Learning from Action Research," *Learning and the Teacher*. Washington, D. C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1957. p. 187.

⁹ Ross L. Mooney, "The Researcher Himself," *Research for Curriculum Improvement*. Washington, D. C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1957. p. 166.

¹⁰ Ronald C. Doll, "Freedom for Research," *Research for Curriculum Improvement*. Washington, D. C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1957. p. 260.

should assist in assessing teachers' suggestions and in helping them find a problem that fits the researcher's insight, the needs of the situation, and the amount of time available.

Post-research Tasks

The best thing a supervisor can do in terms of evaluating action research is to evaluate himself. The following checklist is suggestive rather than comprehensive:

1. Have I continually supplied materials essential to the success of this project?

2. Have I supplied reliable moral support throughout its development?

3. Have I been available for consultation on problems that arose during this study?

4. Did I take enough time to interpret results and to discuss ways in which this new information can be implemented in everyday teaching?

5. Did I provide opportunities for the individual or the group to be recognized for worthwhile action?

6. Did I provide opportunities for the results of the action research project to be shared by other members of the profession?

7. Have I myself recognized how this information will modify present curriculum guides in the school, and have I taken positive steps toward the necessary revision?

8. Have I helped to make teachers aware of personal growth through this action research?

9. Have I continually stressed values of the process rather than the product?

10. Have I used the present success to stimulate new research enterprise?

The supervisor's use of action research is thus seen to be a challenging and continuous activity. In the final analysis it is the teacher who adjusts the school curriculum to the *de facto* needs of his students. If teachers are not taught and

assisted in doing action research, there is danger, for example, that the guides and syllabi remain sterile compendia of objectives never translated into those specific teaching points that make learning meaningful to both teacher and student.

If supervisors can help teachers to acquire the breadth of viewpoint inherent in intellectual inquiry, they themselves will become instrumental in initiating change. As Stephen Corey states, "Most of the study of what should be kept in the schools, what should go, and what should be added must be done in hundreds and thousands of classrooms in thousands of American communities."¹¹

Hilda Taba, curriculum and evaluation specialist, calls for curriculum development through practical action research over and above general educational research:

Principles derived from general research need to be reexamined in the light of their application in a particular practical situation to be of real value to solve curriculum problems and to make changes in curriculum. For example, while a good deal is known about the general nature of developmental tasks and their bearing on learning, little is known about the variation of these tasks by socioeconomic class culture, by ethnic or racial backgrounds or by variations in social learning introduced by family styles. Hence, if this concept is to bear fruit in curriculum and teaching, its application needs to be studied in many different practical situations.¹²

Teachers, then, are at the heart of the educational setup. Their growth is vital

¹¹ Stephen Corey, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹² Hilda Taba, "Problem Identification," *Research for Curriculum Improvement*. Washington, D. C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1957. p. 42.

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to the improvement of the entire enterprise. When supervisors can promote action research and self-development as one integrative action, they make an outstanding personal contribution to the improvement of education. When supervisors free teachers to be themselves and to function creatively in school circumstances they are, at the same time, liberating the creative potential of the students. Jane Franseth makes the self-realization of students largely dependent on the dynamic growth of teachers:

Freeing children to create and to become their best is in large measure dependent on the extent to which the adults closest to children are themselves free to make the best of their own potential.¹³

The supervisor who dedicates himself to teacher growth and to action research as an instrument of self-actualization for teachers brings genuine meaning into education. His is the laurel of creative achievement for having made the business of education and the business of living one coherent enterprise.

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¹³Jane Franseth. "Freeing Capacity To Be Creative." *New Insights and the Curriculum*. Washington, D. C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1963. p. 316.

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