

## **INNOVATION AND THE OPEN SCHOOL**

**ARTHUR J. LEWIS**

THE issue underlying the theme, "Unlocking the Schools," is the question of the open school—how open, and to whom? A school is open when its curriculum responds to the changing needs of society and when school personnel work with interested citizens to extend and improve educational services. The selection of the present theme is symptomatic of the concern for a rapprochement between these two groups. This concern is the result of the recognition that isolated efforts by either school personnel or external innovators are inadequate to bring about needed changes in education.

Fifteen years ago curriculum development was the province of teachers and other school personnel who shaped an educational program to meet the needs of a given school or school system. It was assumed that teachers were or could become sensitive to changing needs and that through an application of group problem-solving methods they could make appropriate changes in the local curriculum.

While changes resulting from this approach were likely to be long-lasting, they were slow in development. Further, because the school as an institution was relatively insulated from society, curriculum development did not, in fact, keep pace with the changing needs of society. For these reasons, when our society entered a period of rapid change, the schools were not able to respond. For example, the problem of poor-quality education in densely populated urban areas has existed for some time; but significant action has begun only recently under the impact of external prodding. For another example, one might ask how many curriculum leaders have been, or are now, aware of the implications of the new technology for education.

### **Initiative for Change**

Failure to adapt to changing conditions is often fatal to an organization. In the case of the schools, this was not so, but the schools' failure caused the initiative for curriculum change to shift to external innovators. In the battle cry,

"Education is too important to leave to the educators," the advocates of a revolutionary approach to curriculum development implied that the schools were ingrown and unresponsive to the environment and that external intervention was required to introduce necessary innovations. As a remedy, external innovators developed prepackaged curriculum programs for mass distribution to the schools. Teacher participation in these new curriculum programs was often limited to receiving instruction regarding the use of new material.

Has this revolutionary approach to curriculum development been effective? In part it has; the rate of adoption of innovations has increased rapidly during the past few years. However, many of these innovations are failing and innovative artifacts are gathering dust in equipment storage rooms, teachers' closets, and principals' files. Frequently, new programs are introduced and then fade quietly away. Some innovations are not even given a fair trial by teachers. Other innovations are simply unworkable because they are not in accord with the characteristics of the learners.

Unfortunately, some of the innovations that have apparently succeeded may prove to be detrimental to the achievement of a balanced curriculum. Bold innovations in some subject areas have resulted in neglect of other subjects. Technological innovations can contribute significantly to cognitive growth. But what of affective growth? Will innovations that provide powerful means for man to become an educated being come to determine the ends of his education? Will the new media of education determine its goals as well as its scope? This is the type of question which must be asked, not only by innovators and teachers, but by the general public. Innovation is too important to leave to the innovators.

Having pronounced "a plague on both your houses," it is appropriate to recognize that external innovators are actively seeking the aid and cooperation of school personnel, not for the passive role of adopting innovations but for active participation in the complete sequence of developing, introducing and evaluating curriculum changes. On their part, school personnel recognize the necessity of actively relating the schools to the many changes in society and to a developing technology. They are seeking ways to work cooperatively with external innovators and other interested citizens in order to extend and improve the quality of educational experiences. Most school personnel are seeking the open school.

### **Effective Innovation**

The recognition that an open school is desirable does not assure effective innovation. Curriculum workers, both within and without the schools, should realize that other organizations also have problems in innovation. Business organizations face failure if they do not adapt to changing conditions. Students of this important fact of organizational life find that innovation within bureaucratic organizations (among which they include schools) can be particularly difficult.

Victor A. Thompson, professor of political science at the Maxwell Graduate

School, Syracuse University, has given special attention to this problem. In his article, "Bureaucracy and Innovation,"<sup>1</sup> he identifies several requirements for an organization to be innovative. These include the following:

- Resources for innovation—available money, time, skills and good will.
- Employees who have developed themselves thoroughly in some area, about to the limits of their capacities, so that they have that richness of experience and self-confidence upon which creativity thrives—in a word, professionals.
- Ease and freedom of communication and a low level of parochialism.
- Interest in professional growth that provides the rising aspirations needed to stimulate search beyond the first-found satisfactory solution.
- A certain level of problem insecurity and challenge, but a high level of personal security.
- A creative atmosphere free from external pressures—freedom to innovate. The employee needs considerable, but not complete, autonomy and self-direction and a large voice in deciding at what he will work.
- The use of group processes.

The fact that teachers are more nearly professionals than are most workers in bureaucracies suggests that Thompson's requirements for innovation may be of considerable significance to the schools.

Further, teacher interest in curriculum development is increasing. The teacher negotiation movement is best understood as part of a quest for self-realization on the part of teachers and teacher groups. Teachers want freedom to work in ways they judge appropriate; they do not wish to be forced to follow patterns established by someone else. Teachers want an opportunity to participate in planning and decision making. For example, the grievance procedure contained in the contract between the New Rochelle (New York) Board of Education and the teachers provides for the finding of a grievance in case of a dispute arising from the overriding of a tenure teacher's judgment in the area of his competence. This is interpreted by the teachers to mean that differences about such things as textbooks, pupil evaluation and teaching methods cannot be unilaterally resolved by the administration.

Can the open school be achieved? Can curriculum development keep pace with the changing needs of society? Yes, through curriculum development procedures that (a) encourage cooperation with external innovators and other interested citizens; (b) are consistent with recent findings regarding innovation in bureaucratic organizations; and (c) provide for teacher participation which utilizes the increased interest of teacher groups in decision making. This is no small order.

—ARTHUR J. LEWIS, *Professor of Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York*

<sup>1</sup>Victor A. Thompson. "Bureaucracy and Innovation." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 10 (1): 5ff; June 1965.

Copyright © 1967 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.