

Innovation and Change in Education

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- What are the most effective facilitators in the development and operation of educational innovations? What factors make curriculum changes easier to carry out, goals more readily attained?

- What are the most common obstacles to change? What factors stand in the way, block change in education?

AN INFORMAL and unofficial study of ESEA Title III projects in Michigan reveals some interesting data about the educational change process to those of us who are concerned with the preceding questions. With the purpose of helping educators avoid pitfalls and employ sound strategies by benefiting from the experiences of other educators who have been greatly involved in the conception, initiation, development, and operation of innovative and/or exemplary educational programs, some observations of the Michigan Title III projects are shared.

The commonly held notion that *materials*, *equipment*, and *organizational patterns* are the key factors in program development is dispelled. While *time for planning* the operation of new programs is of some importance, from the data available it is apparent that teachers and administrators who are involved in ESEA Title III projects look upon *human factors* as more crucial to curriculum change than non-human or material factors. *Humans* are both the most commonly cited *obstacles to* and *facilitators of* educational change. Working effectively with

people appears to be the key to successful innovation and change, particularly when the "unknown" is involved.

It is noteworthy that *students* are never cited by ESEA Title III teachers and administrators as either facilitators or obstacles! Does this mean that students act neutrally toward curriculum change? Are they readily amenable to almost any kind of change? Do they hold a "wait and see" attitude when an educational change is under way? Or are teachers and administrators oblivious to students, to their reactions and influence?

Human facilitating factors, it is apparent, include the support, interest, involvement, enthusiasm, encouragement, and accessibility of parents, administrators, and teachers.

More specifically, ESEA Title III administrators and teachers cite the following as the greatest facilitating factors in educational change:

- . . . community support—individual people and agencies and clubs . . .
- . . . the former superintendent, a key person . . .
- . . . the great support and help from everyone involved . . .
- . . . the high quality staff . . .
- . . . excellent cooperation—good liaison people . . . much support from area administrators . . .

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- . . . the ten lay citizens serving on the coordinating council . . .
- . . . the great number of parents participating—their support . . .
- . . . excellent cooperation and good communication . . .
- . . . the support of the administration . . .
- . . . staff commitment that the project would work, real staff involvement in planning and directing the project, and the summer planning-learning time for staff . . .
- . . . extensive and enthusiastic teacher involvement has been the key to success . . .
- . . . encouragement from . . . and good working relationships (with all involved) . . .

Human obstacles to change occur in the form of suspicion, reluctance, threat, and lack of communication. The following are specifically cited as the greatest obstacles:

- . . . administrators, especially the local district superintendents . . .
- . . . criticism from non-project teachers . . .
- . . . educators in the district . . .
- . . . communication to parents . . .
- . . . acceptance by the regular public school staff . . .
- . . . the high school principal (who) is dragging his heels. The high school teachers as well are reluctant . . .
- . . . communication . . .
- . . . getting teachers . . . to believe in the Project. The older teachers especially felt insecure . . .
- . . . the lack of communication with the staff involved in the program . . .
- . . . (the difficulty finding) time to spend with the school administration personnel. . . . Time is needed to help the superintendent, who is relatively new to the system, to understand the philosophy behind the Project and gain his more active involvement in it . . .
- . . . the high rate of teacher turnover . . .
- . . . difficulty in working with six independent and different school principals . . .
- . . . the threat to staff . . . to put their integrity on the line. . . .

If we may generalize from this informal study of ESEA Title III to other curriculum improvement projects in education, it is evi-

dent that greater attention must be given to the *human element* by those responsible for educational change. Especially during the initial part of the educational change process, attention and effort must be concentrated on people involved in and affected by the change, with much less emphasis upon the material, non-human elements, as Stephen Corey has remarked in his book, *Helping Other People Change*.¹

The creation of project coordinating councils has been one means used by some Michigan ESEA Title III project staffs for reducing threat and suspicion and building support and cooperation. The membership of these councils usually represents a variety of groups who are, or will be, affected by the particular curriculum changes, and includes lay citizens, especially parents. When these councils function in a genuinely advisory capacity, such human involvement builds commitment.

Other significant factors in working effectively with the human element in educational change include adequate planning-development time prior to actual operation of new projects, and meaningful in-service education for professional staff members.

Certainly one of the most important issues in education today is the extent to which teachers and administrators (pre-service and in-service) are being helped to gain skills in working effectively with other people, the extent to which human relations skills are a part of teacher education. A crucial point to consider as we work with others in bringing about educational change is the matter of empathy. The lack of empathy with others, inability to perceive the "world" as others see it in their positions, appears to be one of the greatest obstacles to building good human relationships.

Let it not be said of us that *humans* are our obstacle to bringing about a needed curriculum change. "*Ne sim obex*" (Latin). "May I not be an obstacle!" □

¹ Stephen M. Corey. *Helping Other People Change*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1963.

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