

The **INFLEXIBILITY** of *Flexible* **MODULAR** **SCHEDULING**

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FLEXIBLE modular scheduling is a particular innovative plan of organization for teaching and learning in the secondary school. After two years of planning, Franklin High School in Livonia, Michigan, adopted this innovative plan in September 1966. The discussion to follow is an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of The Franklin Plan as evaluated by a classroom teacher in the school.

There are two terms that are used in reference to this particular organizational plan. One is "modular," the other is "flexible."

Modular is simply a term that is used to describe the time periods into which the school day is broken. Modules of 15 minutes are used at Franklin, with a total of 27 in a school day. Homeroom consumes the first module and combinations of modules allow the appropriate assignment of time for a specific subject on any one day.

The other term, flexible, appears to be ambiguous in reference to this scheduling because it implies flexibility which does not exist in actual practice. While the traditional schedule repeats itself daily, the flexible schedule repeats itself weekly; however, a teacher who teaches on a flexible schedule is as bound to his plan as is the traditional

teacher. For instance, if a teacher has scheduled meeting two large lecture groups and two small inquiry groups in a week, he is bound by the very inflexibility of the plan to honor these meetings whether he has adequate material to lecture on or a valid purpose for each inquiry group.

The large group affords the broadest opportunity for revealing the inflexibilities of the flexible schedule. If for some reason, such as a field trip, a curriculum day, or an ill teacher, a scheduled large group is canceled, the entire six- or eight-week lesson plan can be seriously interrupted or even possibly destroyed. Also, a large group lecture that must be canceled for whatever reason has an unfortunate effect on the following small-group meetings. The small inquiry group cannot be effectively structured or effectively directed without a preceding large-group lecture, for the small group is a parasite which feeds off the large group.

Because of the number of small groups among which a teacher must divide his time, he is limited in the number of large groups to which he can lecture. Most teachers, regardless of subject area, feel that two lectures per week are the maximum for which they have time. While teachers claim their large group lectures are more organized, more selective,

and more effective, they also feel their lectures are not as detailed. This lack of time to be attentive to detail in effect changes the content of a course.

Teachers make these comments on what they teach:

"I assume a greater supervisory role in minutes in non-class activities such as noon duties, hall patrol, or study hall duties."

"I have to spend more time planning and organizing."

"I teach a more select body of material, but I also organize my presentation of the material more effectively."

"I do not have enough contact with the kids."

"A team of teachers is able to combine their abilities and ideas for more effective and interesting teaching."

How teachers teach is another matter of concern under this program. For the adventurous teacher with a large supply of available energy and irrepressible curiosity which lead him into one adventure-laden situation after another, flexible scheduling is one opportunity after another. As one teacher with 10 years experience stated, "It is the first year of teaching all over again." If in fact, "flexible" has any validity as a term at Franklin, it is in teacher behavior.

Teachers find they use different methods of teaching under flexible modular scheduling. This also has an effect upon course content. The responses elicited from teachers to the question, "Does flexible scheduling affect how you teach?" fall primarily into four areas: teaching small groups, using audio-visual aids, team teaching, and work load.

The area over which the teachers in *this* high school expressed the most concern was teaching small groups. When we embarked upon this particular innovation, we had the assistance of David W. Beggs of Indiana University, who incidentally wrote a book on the procedures in teaching of the small inquiry group. With his assistance, the staff of this high school endeavored to find a method of handling the small group. However, it appeared, in examining these

methods, that the major influence upon the students in a small group was the personality of the teacher himself or, in some cases, the combined personalities of members of the group. In other words, the effectiveness of the group was dependent to a large extent upon the kinds of students that were in the group. As a result, the theory and operation of the inquiry group were open to interpretation, although some prescribed procedures were found to work successfully with some students.

Consequently, teachers varied their methods from running a tight ship in small groups (which meant providing discussion questions, directing the discussion, and being an active member of the group) to allowing the students to handle these chores themselves, in short, almost total freedom. Most teachers felt this type of teaching was far different from the traditional classroom situation. One teacher, for instance, stated that it was extremely difficult to sit quietly on the sidelines while student discussion leaders directed discussion, sometimes effectively, sometimes ineffectively. She further felt it was almost impossible for her to say nothing while students fumbled about for 30 minutes seeking an answer to a concept which she could tell them in one minute. Of course, teachers also experienced difficulty in finding ways to effect total participation of the group. Another teacher commented, "How do you grade a student in a small group when he never speaks?" A grade, incidentally, which under the Franklin plan may be as much as one-third of the total grade.

This matter of small groups is one of no little concern to the majority of teachers involved with the program. "What shall I do?" is the way one teacher put it. "What is the purpose of the small group? To give the students the opportunity to explore the subject matter in depth? To have them ventilate their feelings? To give the unstable an opportunity to dominate the group under the guise of democracy? And does a student who has nothing to say penalize himself by not saying anything?" All of these are legitimate questions under this and any other program. They remain to be answered.

The range of abilities of the students in a particular small group also dictates the method which must be employed by the teacher in handling the group effectively. I have mentioned this previously. This is a problem which necessitates a flexibility and an intuitive ability on the part of the teacher seldom required for teaching on a traditional schedule. Taken together, the problems inherent in teaching via the small inquiry group obviously create serious obstructions to maintaining a uniformity between teachers of like courses, as well as creating obstacles that hinder the adherence to a course syllabus.

There are other matters of concern to the teaching staff. One of the not-so-minor ones is that of audio-visual aids. With para-professionals involved in return of AV equipment, it is common to hear an under-the-breath remark when a teacher's aide fails to get the film or filmstrip in on time. Ordinarily, this is merely a matter of light concern when it means that only one class misses the scheduled movie. Now it means that one large group, perhaps half the students taking a course, miss the presentation, which will not be repeated unless the program and instructor are more flexible than usual. This particular problem has been solved to a degree at this time at Franklin. It has been necessary to tape most large-group presentations. These are then available to students for independent listening in one of the AV rooms.

However, teachers say they use more audio-visual aids than ever before. Under this program, each teacher must soon become an expert in the use of each of the devices from the AV center. You don't know how to use a tape recorder? Just ask the next teacher coming down the hall. He will tell you how to do it because the staff has gotten to the point where there is a kind of camaraderie, much like that of troops in combat. This morale condition has implications for a team teaching situation, in which two or more instructors get together for the formal presentation of the course material. The teachers

just have to get along together or the school would not operate. And thanks to the inflexibility of the plan, disaster strikes if the original presenter is absent when he is supposed to perform. This gives an opportunity for the originality and versatility and creative ability of the teacher-performer who has to "go on" with very little warning and extremely limited preparation. Then again, some of the best preparations have been made in this fashion.

Spreading the work load under this system is an interesting exercise in staff cooperation and leads to situations which look like feeding time at the wolves' den at the zoo: who got the most large groups, and who got the study halls, and who got the lunchroom? These are the things which get the majority of teacher time in the lounge and lunchroom and at after-school parties. It is gossip, but it is indicative of the type of things which are of concern to the staff. "I've never worked harder in my life." "I finally got time to talk with more of my students." "This program has made teaching come alive for me." These are the kinds of things that teachers say, too.

In summary, I should like to state that perhaps flexible teacher behavior is the main ingredient necessary in effective flexible modular scheduling.

The November 1968 issue of *Nation's Schools*, in an article entitled "Does Innovation Make Any Difference?" compares several flexible schools with several traditional schools.

The author states:

Despite much involvement in planning technical aspects of the flexible schedule, it appears that in many instances not much change in teaching occurred except that traditional teaching was done for different lengths of time in different sized groups.

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