

# Impact of Educational Research on Teaching and Learning

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**M**AKING sense of educational data and their interpretation for the benefit of students in the classroom is the business of curriculum workers. At the building level it is the principal's job if he or she is truly the instructional leader.

As a beginning high school principal I felt a responsibility to supply a professional library with new books and periodical subscriptions which were considered significant. This practice was discontinued when it was discovered that these materials were not requested by the faculty members. This is not to say that in the group of over a hundred teachers there was no one who had an interest in finding new and better ways. It merely indicated that their search did not include perusing available literature. Research studies held little interest.

The logical conclusion was that either a study of available data was too much trouble or too time-consuming to read, or else it posed a threat not to be contended with. At any rate, if there is to be substantive benefit from inquiry it must be a result of translation by the curriculum worker, principal, or whomever. Teachers are fearful of

influences which might portend to tell them how to teach. There is another reason for hesitancy on the part of high school teachers. They are subject matter oriented, for the most part, and fitting their particular tunnel view into the large picture is not easy. Therefore, unless their teaching field is dealt with in the data there is little interest.

Never in history have we had access to as much concrete information as we have today. All countable things are counted. All measurable things are measured. We know that there are more qualified teachers than there are jobs, that the school enrollments are going down while the total costs are going up, that SAT scores are sliding and that girls are sliding more than boys. We can determine reading levels, dropout rates, incidence of vandalism, and the magnitude of attendance problems. The list of facts goes on and on. We are doing an excellent job of relating some countable things to other countable things. For instance, the relationship between achievement level and frequency of absence, or between minority population and suspension rate can be determined. This mountain of information has little relevance to teaching and learning in the classroom because reasons are not dealt with adequately, if at all.

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## What Should Be Measured?

Despite financial grants for inquiry, and in the face of continuing interest in and national emphasis on determining the status of education, many questions are yet to be answered if we are to produce substantive classroom benefit. Perhaps a consensus as to just what really should be measured is still to be arrived at. The importance of the numbers game need not be minimized; hard data will always be needed. However, should we not be making every effort to relate the school climate to the number of students who voluntarily exclude themselves, or teacher attitude to achievement? When teacher behaviors, expectations and value systems vary widely from room to room, students must cope with five or six different worlds each day. No amount of curriculum research can get at this type of problem unless the interpersonal relationship between teacher and student is included in the investigation.

The difficulty of measuring development in the purely human dimension is enormous. One would hope, however, that it is not impossible, and that at some time we will be able to determine not only if a student is developing into an adult who feels worthy and is a participating citizen and a loving

parent, but just what teaching strategies and attitudes have helped along the road in that direction. It is felt today that the ratio of cost to benefit can be determined, using dollars and test scores. In my opinion this is a fallacious connection of facts, for we are mixing unrelated things as long as we are using the present measuring devices. There is nothing wrong with defining just what is being received for the dollars. But we must find better ways of determining the extent and quality of the product. Standardized tests, most widely accepted of all means of evaluating students, are designed to differentiate among them. Any item on which all students score correctly is dropped.

I would welcome a moratorium on all standardized testing of American children and teen-agers until ways and methods could be devised to ascertain how they are developing as human beings as well as possessors of skills and facts. And as a corollary, perhaps some energy could be channeled into the training of teachers on-the-job in communication skills and ways of creating a healthy and respectful learning climate. Then our schooling would truly become education.

Two aspects of some recent inquiry cause me no little concern. There are studies described editorially as significant, and con-



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taining what seem to be impressive implications. A study of background tabulations, however, sometimes reveals an extremely narrow data base. This practice is misleading. Four is most certainly twenty-five per-

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cent of sixteen, but hardly a cross-section of anything of respectable research size.

Another concern is the inconclusiveness of some published research. If it is to be helpful to the curriculum worker, and thus to the classroom teacher, it must leave the reader with some conclusion. Either this is related to that (to some degree) or the two are not related at all. Either this will help in doing that (to some degree) or it will not help at all. “Sometimes it is and sometimes it isn’t,” “sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn’t,” do not constitute adequate results, unless, of course, there are specifically defined variables. Research should make a statement if it is to be useful in the classroom.

## **The Role Is Leadership**

The role of the curriculum worker, no matter what the official title, is one of leadership. He or she must be concerned with the overall quality of American education. This concern incorporates not only the what but the how, and above all the why. As was mentioned earlier, this approach can be threatening to teachers. In large systems where a central instructional division services all schools and insists ultimately on a great degree of uniformity, the need for curriculum study on an individual school basis is, of course, minimized, but leadership at the building level is always necessary.

Substantial inquiry can be conducted in one school, and the value of such effort cannot be overlooked. Feelings and opinions

of students can be solicited through questionnaires with valuable results. Such a survey can answer many questions for a school staff. As a high school principal I tried this at one time and learned all kinds of things. The posture of the community in regard to the school can also be determined in this way, with many useful results. Degree of support for and understanding of the efforts of the school is information which can be translated into many kinds of action.

There are so many types of educational inquiry and such mountains of results available that one must exercise judgment in selecting needed and appropriate information. In order to do this, a determination must first be made as to what questions need to be answered to benefit the teacher in the classroom. One consideration has to revolve around the community expectations of the function. Most school principals, if asked what the primary concern of their parent community is, would respond with academic achievement. This is no doubt largely true. However, a little reflection would point up the fact that the parents who are the most satisfied with their schools are those whose young people are happy and achieving, those whose young people have a healthy self-concept and are achieving, and those whose young people are aware of their potential and are achieving. So we must conclude that achievement is not the whole demand. Indeed, substantial learning does not take place without the other factors, in many cases.

Application for its own sake cannot be demanded of our high school students today. Schools must respond to social change and incorporate values that are becoming increasingly important in our society. Due process and respect for individuals and their differences are among these values. Pedantic and authoritarian administrator and teacher behavior is not getting the job done. American people in this last quarter of the century insist on, and will have, involvement. The most significant and the most effective research must be in the areas of people-to-people relationships if we are truly striving to improve the human condition in our field. □

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