

# What Are the Information Demands of Curriculum Supervisors?

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*Eight topics are identified that may help instructional supervisors study and meet the information demands of curriculum workers.*

What information do curriculum workers use when they are considering curriculum related decisions? What factors have an influence on the outcome of these decisions? These questions represent an area of concern to many people in the field of education.

The textbook writer needs to know what types of content to include in a book and how to organize teachers' editions. Educational developers need to know how to describe their products in order to plan effective dissemination programs. State Education Agency personnel preparing curriculum guides need to know what to include and how to describe the general area of applicability of these documents. Curriculum coordinators at the school level need to know what sort of information to gather in preparation for curriculum committee meetings.

All of these instances represent critical concerns of schooling. It would seem to be important, therefore, to have some notion of the types of information used in curriculum decision situations in order to prepare appropriate materials for committees or others involved in curriculum decision-making activities.

## Studies of Information Use

There is a considerable body of literature that identifies the types of information curriculum supervisors should use in a decision situation.<sup>1</sup> The three most commonly identified topics that

should be used in such a decision situation are: student characteristics and needs; the nature of the society in which the school exists; and organized bodies of knowledge from which curricular material might be drawn. It may be assumed that some of these suggested topics represent observations based on experience in the field. The tenor of the literature, however, is largely prescriptive in nature rather than being directly descriptive with respect to the actual information utilization traits of curriculum workers.

Identifying the actual information used in curriculum decision situations is a difficult empirical task. To begin with, it is difficult to identify curriculum decision situations or to specify a particular point in time at which decisions are made. The whole idea of a logical sequence, following the Tyler Rationale, for example, has been questioned by educators.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the concept of information "used" in a situation is difficult to

<sup>1</sup> Most textbooks dealing with curriculum contain distinct sections devoted to sources of the curriculum. Some examples of other reviews devoted to this topic are: Robert R. Leeper, editor. *What Are the Sources of the Curriculum?* Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1962; John D. McNeil. "Forces Influencing Curriculum." *Review of Educational Research* 39(3):293-318; June 1969.

<sup>2</sup> For example: Frank A. Schmidlein. "Decision Process Paradigms in Education." *Educational Researcher* 3(5):4-11; May 1974; John A. Zahorik. "A Task for Curriculum Research." *Educational Leadership* 33(7):487-89; April 1976.

define operationally. For example, information may be "used" for a variety of purposes ranging from awareness of the existence of a program to an actual decision to implement the program in a specific setting. Possibly as a result of these considerations, there have not been many empirical studies of information used by curriculum workers.

In published reviews of the literature dealing with information requirements and needs of social scientists, reference is made to the small number of studies that concentrate on educators as subjects.<sup>3</sup> Finding instances in which curriculum workers are the subjects investigated in such studies is even more uncommon. Most of the cases in the literature are studies of the general information needs of educators without differentiation by role or job title and the data are obtained by some form of self-report measurement technique. Some examples of studies that are more directly related to the concerns of the curriculum worker are those reported by Rittenhouse and Twelker *et al.*

Rittenhouse found that, in addition to seeking information from co-workers, there is some reason to believe that educators do use information from texts and curriculum materials in order to make curriculum decisions.<sup>4</sup> Twelker *et al.* report that specific groups within education do not have common information needs but that curriculum specialists listed as top priority more items in common with other specific groups of educators than any other group.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the literature that does exist seems to suggest that curriculum workers draw upon information about students, social settings, and organized bodies of knowledge, and that they seek this information primarily from co-workers and to a limited degree from documents. Also, curriculum supervisors do appear to have certain patterns of topic demands that are shared by others in the field of education.

### Information Demands in a Simulated Setting

An approach to gain some further insight into the nature of information used in curriculum decisions is the study of the requests for information made by curriculum workers during a simulation exercise involving curriculum decisions. Such an approach has some obvious limitations. For

instance, there is no way to completely control the knowledge that a subject brings into a simulation exercise. Also, the conditions of the simulation will always remain somewhat unnatural despite the elaborateness of the particular exercise. However, when these and other limitations are taken into consideration in using the results of such studies, these results may help answer some of the questions presented in the introduction.

Pursuant to a grant from the National Institute of Education, one such study of curriculum supervisors was conducted in the spring of 1975.<sup>6</sup>

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Data were gathered during a simulation exercise in which a randomly selected sample of practicing curriculum supervisors in the state of Louisiana was presented with a series of 169 reports described as the products of self-study committees

<sup>3</sup> For example: Marcia J. Bates. *User Studies: A Review for Librarians and Information Scientists*. U.S. Educational Resources Information Center, ERIC Document ED047738, March 1971; John M. Brittain. *Information and Its Uses*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1970; William J. Paisley. "Information Needs and Uses." In: Carlos A. Cuadra, editor. *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*. (Volume 3) Chicago: William Benton Publishing Company, 1968. pp. 1-30.

<sup>4</sup> Carl H. Rittenhouse. "Educational Information Uses and Users." *AV Communications Review* 19(1): 76-88; Spring 1971.

<sup>5</sup> Paul A. Twelker *et al.* *Information Wants of Seven Groups of Users Considering the Adoption or Adaptation of Instructional Systems*. U.S. Educational Resources Information Center, ERIC Document ED061773, January 1972.

<sup>6</sup> A more detailed report of the project is available from ERIC: John W. Newfield. *Information Demands of Curriculum Supervisors. Final Report*. U.S. Educational Resources Information Center, ERIC Document ED116297, May 1976.

in a hypothetical school. Each report contained information that was classified according to topic. The subjects were asked to prepare themselves to make a report dealing with their recommendations concerning an aerospace education curriculum program for the school. A record of the topics of information examined during a two- and one-half-hour period was obtained by using a tab recording technique. Several other instruments were used to gather data about the background and psychological characteristics of the subjects.

The major purposes of the study were to determine the topics of information demanded by curriculum supervisors and to determine whether these topics are related to the background and psychological characteristics of the supervisors. In addition, data were gathered related to the information-seeking habits of the subject. With respect to the first question, eight general topics of information sought by the supervisors were identified: (a) general information about the subject area of the curriculum decision; (b) specific information about the content of the subject area; (c) views of the school situation held by teachers; (d) the views of the school situation held by other interest groups; (e) resources of the school; (f) student ability; (g) the strength of present curriculum offerings in the area related to the curriculum decision; and (h) information about the background of the community and community views of school issues. With respect to the second purpose of the study, no relationships were found between these eight topics of information and any of the psychological or professional background characteristics of the curriculum supervisors.

### **Suggestions for Curriculum Supervisors**

What are the implications of the results reported here for those who must plan and organize material for the consideration of individuals involved in curriculum decisions? These implications relate to the questions posed in the introduction as well as to the full range of organizational activities of a curriculum supervisor who must marshal material to assist in decision situations.

To a degree, the findings of the study offer encouragement to those seeking general answers to questions related to planning material for decision situations. The finding of no relation-

ships between topics of information demands and characteristics of the supervisors, in conjunction with data that indicate that the topics most frequently demanded were directly relevant to the decision task assigned to the subjects, suggests that answers to the questions posed in the introduction of this article can be formed prior to obtaining particular personal information about the intended users of curriculum-related information. These answers can be determined by considering the nature of the anticipated curriculum decisions.

The first specific suggestion for curriculum supervisors is drawn from another part of the study that included data obtained from the subjects concerning the sources of information that the subjects use in their work. The data reinforce recommendations made in the literature for an interpersonal communication link in the dissemination process. The most frequently cited sources of information were the local school system conferences or workshops and co-workers. State Department of Education personnel and textbook representatives were also reported as common sources for curriculum-related information. This seems to imply that the supervisor organizing for a curriculum meeting should consider the composition of various groups or committees involved in order to ensure the opportunity for the interpersonal communication that is so valued by educators.

In terms of meeting format, the conference or workshop may have been frequently listed as an information source by curriculum supervisors simply because of the opportunities afforded during these meetings for direct personal contact. If this is the case, the data seem to suggest that maximum attention be given to plans that include opportunities for personal communication. The format of a document-based system operating, for example, through memoranda would not seem to be favored by curriculum workers.

Another finding of the study that has implications for the setting of the topic or focus of meetings related to curriculum decisions is that curriculum supervisors seem to regard themselves more as specialists dealing with only up to three subject areas in the curriculum rather than responding to curriculum issues from a broad range of areas. Therefore, dissemination programs re-

lated to curriculum projects might best be coordinated with professional associations designed to serve these specific subject areas. Also, if conferences or meetings are planned they should be set up with a specific focus or topic that would fall within the limits of various specializations in curriculum.

With respect to the information that should be gathered in preparation for these meetings, the data from study of curriculum supervisors' information demands indicated an extreme variety of these demands. The supervisor preparing meetings for curriculum decisions should be aware of this fact and prepare a comprehensive set of information resources. The study of supervisors' information demands suggests that while these supervisors will request information directly related to specific decision situations, they also seem to attempt to relate the specific situation to other decisions they may have made, and some of their information demands are formed in this fashion.

It may be the case that in order to reduce the information load, curriculum workers attempt to extrapolate from one decision situation to another by carrying over all of the context of a previous situation and indexing this context by the decision that was made. For example, if they have knowledge of the context in which a decision was made concerning a reading program, when presented with a new decision in an unfamiliar context, they may seek information about reading programs in order to determine how much of their previous knowledge can be applied to the new decision situation. If this is true, then even though a specific meeting may be called to consider a science curriculum issue in a school, some of the participants who are not specialists in this area may request information concerning the literature, business, or vocational programs in that school.

The final specific suggestion to curriculum supervisors is that even though the information demands of curriculum workers will be extremely varied, the supervisor preparing for a meeting could find some guidance for developing a comprehensive set of information resources by considering the eight general topics identified in the study. For a specific curriculum decision in a given school context, these topics would include general information about the subject area of the proposed decision, specific information about the

content involved in this subject area, descriptions of the views of the school situation held by teachers and other interest groups, the resources of the school, student ability, the strength of present curriculum offerings in areas related to the proposed decision, and information concerning the community in which the school is located.

These topics along with the other suggestions may help provide the answer to the initial questions posed as concerns for the textbook writers, curriculum developers, state education agency personnel, and curriculum coordinators at the local school level. *[E]*



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