

Educational Research and Its Dissemination

LOAZ W. JOHNSON

Why is practice so little affected by research results? Why the chasm which apparently exists between research workers and the administrators who can implement research findings? This author discusses these and other questions in this thoughtful article.

TO A CERTAIN extent all progress depends upon research. This research may be done formally, that is, by carefully and scientifically collecting, organizing and interpreting a mass of data, or informally, that is, by personal observations. Ordinarily, the more formal the research, that is, the more scientifically planned and executed it is, the more apt it is to provide sound guides for improvement. However, for several reasons, it does not follow that, in the field of education, the most scientifically executed research always promotes progress.

It is true that research procedures in education have been greatly refined during the past half century. It is also true that much progress in education can be attributed to the findings of research.¹ On the other hand, the indications are that far more time and effort have been wasted on research in education than in any other endeavor. Especially is this true with respect to implementation of research, since a relatively small percent of the findings is ever used either directly or indirectly in the schools.

The purpose in this article, then, is to point out some of the reasons why much of our technically good research is non-effective in that the results are not utilized to promote educational progress, to point out some weaknesses of informal, or catch as catch can, type of research, and to recommend some methods and procedures for bringing research findings across the chasm of obstacles and indifference into the field of practice. The major sources of information are official reports of the American Educational Research Association, current periodical literature, and comments of teachers and administrators at professional meetings as recorded by the writer.

It is generally recognized that much of our formal research has been done on the basis of curiosity or personal interest rather than in terms of well recognized needs. Many college professors and directors of research have been heard to say: "It would be interesting to find out whether so and so is true or not." Or "I am just curious to learn what they think about it." These men who are in a position to influence

¹ For an account of the accomplishments in education attributed to research, see Conrad, Herbert S. "Research—Education's Gibraltar." *School Life*, Vol. 34, No. 7, April 1952, p. 97-98.

Loaz W. Johnson is coordinator of curriculum, Public Schools, Butte County, Oroville, California.

research seem to think they have fulfilled their obligation when they have provided practice exercises in good research techniques. Apparently they think their understudies, when they get on the job, will use the acquired skills in doing practical research to promote educational progress.

In regard to this practice, Andrew P. Hill, in speaking to a group of secondary-school principals said: "There is little doubt that we American educators are very much creatures of habit. We get introduced to the practices of research and evaluation in our professional training, but seldom ever apply those principles and practices with any imagination or consistency."²

Much research sponsored by college personnel and by representatives from state, county, city and local units has been fragmentary and unrelated. The findings are often of concern to so few that efforts to utilize them have not been too successful. It is often found that certain drastic changes need to be made before the findings can be put to use. As administrators and their staff members are not usually prepared to coordinate and utilize such fragmentary reports, these findings usually fall by the wayside.

Then, there is not the competition in education that is found in industry where research findings are used most extensively. Industrial representatives, in the interest of survival, are constantly in search of new and better ways of doing things. The school administrator, on the other hand, often assumes that his tenure and security depend

more upon maintaining the status quo than upon the initiation of marked or radical changes. As the administrator realizes that often such changes must be supported with satisfactory, tangible results and that he and his teachers are not in a position to provide the necessary supporting evidence, he is not too anxious to sponsor research or to use the research findings of others.

What Administrators Want from Research

Finally, there is the deep chasm between research workers and the administrators who control the implementation of research findings. A rather extensive study of this problem was made by the present writer and was reported at the San Francisco meeting of the American Educational Research Association in 1949.³ As portions of this report are still pertinent to this problem, some of the high points will be given here.

A majority of the administrators reporting in this study said that they were not satisfied with what research workers were contributing to help them improve their school programs. They considered research reports too formal and foreign for practical application in ordinary school situations. According to these administrators, most educational research is done under ideal or unique conditions which make the findings of little value to the ordinary school administrator. Yet, a large majority of the administrators responding agreed that research workers were providing some needed information on

² Hill, Andrew P. "How the High School Principal Develops a More Functional Program of Education." *Bulletin of Secondary-School Principals* 32:92, April 1948.

³ Johnson, Loaz W. "What Administrators Want and Will Use from Research Workers." *Growing Points In Educational Research*. 1949 Official Report, American Educational Research Association, p. 7-12.

educational problems, but that administrators were not utilizing the findings extensively.

In answer to the request that administrators list titles of three or more research reports which they had read during the past year, the gleanings were rather scant. Almost half of those reporting made no entry under this item. No administrator listed as many as three bona fide research reports. The few titles listed dealt largely with student needs, finances and building programs. The school curriculum was not mentioned in any of the lists.

The dearth of guidance materials which these administrators had examined and the limited amount of research materials which they reported as having provided their teachers would indicate that they were really doing very little toward implementing research findings in their schools. In fact, the data showed that only 23 percent of these administrators had set up any kind of procedure at all for utilizing the findings of research in their school programs.

Although the reports indicated that administrators were not too familiar with research reports, they seemed to know exactly what they wanted from research workers. They were not interested in having "counting research" reports or mill-run master or doctor theses. They wanted brief, simple reports in non-technical language which the layman or, at least, the ordinary teacher could understand. These reports should be grouped by topics or subjects or by school divisions each year and should be accompanied by interpretations and recommendations by experts on the topics or problems

under consideration. Several requests were made for a handbook of research reports and a catalogue of recommended practices resulting from conclusive research.

Two sample responses were:

School research should be practical, pointed, graphic and in language adapted to lay understanding.

Brief, practical findings in regard to curriculum building, finance and personnel in such form that he who runs may read.

This report and results of other research done five to ten years ago, when there was a special effort to promote greater utilization of research, show that there was a great deal of wasted effort and lost motion in research in education. Recent literature and comments by administrators in local, state and national conferences indicate there has been some but very little improvement in the past few years. Many of the administrators who are responsible for implementing research still insist that the reports are too cumbersome, involved and foreign to be usable. Of course, there are exceptions, but many of them insist: "We still depend on bull sessions with our neighboring administrators for new ideas."

Fortunately, however, there are signs of changes which carry potentials for extensive and rapid improvement in both conducting and implementing research in education. These with a few recommendations are now presented.

As the administrator is the key person in implementing research, the national program for improving school administrative personnel is a most promising movement. The studies being made by administrators, their con-

cern for developing schedules of routine matters, and their search for a sound procedure to delegate responsibilities to other personnel to save more time for themselves to devote to the educational program provide an excellent opening for research to receive its deserved consideration. As this movement filters down to the thousands of smaller school systems, it is hoped the administrators will give research a reasonable share of time and attention.

To show the importance of this recommendation a quotation from an article by James H. Fox is given: "If a particular practice is satisfying to the administrator, that is, leads to decisive action, leaves no hang-over problems, and evokes a feeling of mastery over the situation, it is likely to be termed successful. Yet it may not be successful from the standpoint of instruction. . . . It is not unusual to find a school with smooth-running administration and instruction of low quality."⁴

When the report on "What Administrators Want and Will Use from Research Workers" was given before a group of research experts, the response was spontaneous: "The administrators don't want much, do they? Suppose they would like for us to go into their schools and show them exactly how to do things?" After a pause someone drawled out: "Then they won't do anything about it." Probably not realizing it, these research people facetiously recommended something which seems to be vital to the implementation of research, namely, putting research personnel where the research is to be im-

plemented. This encouraging movement is on rapid increase. Research divisions in state departments of education are being expanded. More and more research workers are being added to the personnel in county offices of education and in city and district school systems. In order to attain the ultimate in desired results, however, the services of these research workers in the various school units must be carefully coordinated.

If the findings of research are to be used most extensively and effectively in our schools, it will be necessary for the supervisors and consultants who work out from county and state offices to change their attitudes toward research. Very few of these leaders in education give any attention to research. They need to learn more about the techniques of research both to improve their own methods and procedures and to be able to advise intelligently with teachers and administrators in utilizing the results of research studies.

Increase in Projects Needed

In order to promote more and better implementation of research findings, rapid increase in the number of research-action programs is recommended. This type of program, as described by J. Wayne Wrightstone in *Improving Educational Research*, 1948 Official Report, American Educational Research Association, would require the research technician to become familiar with the conditions under which the research was being done and would enable the administrator to direct research at the problems confronting him. This arrangement would enable the research worker to concentrate on prac-

⁴ Fox, James H. "Secondary School Administrators." *Bulletin of Secondary-School Principals*. 31:55; November 1947.

tical and pertinent school problems and would make it imperative for administrators to become better acquainted with research findings and to use these findings immediately and more extensively.

In support of this type of research program Benne says: "Research in the whole human relations field, including education, is a joint responsibility of research and action agencies in collaboration. Processes of application cannot be separated from the formulation and development of research generalizations, if the latter are to get any adequate testing and evaluation."⁵

In answer to the complaint that research reports are too formal and foreign to be of value to the administrator, it is gratifying to report that the research being sponsored by higher institutions is rapidly becoming more practical. In fact, there is such a deluge of student and professional research workers upon the public schools for research data that there is a growing negative attitude on the part of public school personnel toward the research workers. Often data are requested in a form in which they are not available in the school records and to respond places an extra burden on local personnel. Thus, there is need for greater cooperation between directors of research in our state departments and higher institutions and the administrators and teachers in our public schools.

⁵ Benne, Kenneth D. "An Approach to Issues Underlying Curriculum Development." *Journal of Educational Research* 41:576; April 1948.

Broad Approach Needed

Finally, there may be numerous expert research workers engaged in practical research with many administrators willing to try to implement the findings, but unless some of the research projects are set up to cover broad aspects of the school program and the results are implemented by large geographical areas, research will not contribute to educational improvement as it should. A lone administrator in a school system is not apt to persist in a practice based on sound research findings when the surrounding schools are doing something entirely different. Space will permit only one example to illustrate this recommendation. Thousands of tidbit research studies have been made in the language arts and excellent recommendations for improvement made, yet thousands are still teaching portions of the language arts program as it has been done for years. It seems as if there are obstacles which prevent small groups in limited areas from making desired changes. In California, for example, many teachers and administrators feel obligated to slant their programs toward meeting Subject A requirements instead of developing a program in terms of needs and abilities of the learners. Reports indicate similar conditions exist in other states. If all the schools throughout the nation could give attention to this problem and concentrate on refining and implementing the reports and recommendations of the Curriculum Commission of the National Council of Teachers of English, we might soon have an up-to-date language arts program.

Copyright © 1953 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.