

Research Procedures in the Selection of Curriculum Content

"Research activities carried on locally should become the key for the selection of curriculum content."

ASCHOOL FACULTY in a southern community recently discovered that the predominant need of the tenth grade students was a need for *freedom from fear*.¹ In another school it was found that boys and girls had extremely low scores on aesthetic values.² A third faculty found that the problem area of greatest concern to young people was that of the *curriculum and teaching procedures*.³

In a second series of schools a first grade teacher found that little Mary, who was frequently absent, was rejected by other children in her room on each of a series of sociograms. A fifth grade teacher discovered that Anthony, who was having extreme difficulty in reading, had great interest in animal life and was currently raising and selling rabbits for a substantial profit. A high school English teacher found that Susan, an excellent home economics student, always chose to write themes on topics having to do with clothes, while Steve, a football player, wrote on sports.

A Research Approach

The above cases illustrate the practical implications of simple research techniques for the selection of curriculum content. How different such an approach to curriculum development is from that of making the assumption that a textbook alone has all the needed and appropriate content for all children of a given age regardless of their current activities.

The first three examples suggest important emphases in the work of these classes. The need for freedom from fear, or aesthetic values, or clarification of school problems would likely *not* become central units of work. Yet each area is specific enough to give prominent direction to the selection of curriculum experiences. Perhaps the areas are specific enough to be used as a basis for approaching groups of students with this information (fear, aesthetic values, etc.) as a means of provoking, stimulating, enlisting other problems or concerns which could be directly considered.

Findings having to do with specific children likewise suggest either a process for involving an individual with

¹ *Self-Portrait Needs Test*.

² Allport-Vernon-Lindzey, *Study of Values*.

³ Ross L. Mooney, *Problem Check List*.

his group, or a specific topic for continued work. In the case of sports, animal life or clothes, teachers at once have an opening for an approach through writing, talking, reading, exploring, investigating, creating, informing, projecting, surveying, assessing, evaluating—all filled with active curriculum experiences. Yet this "research" approach should be analyzed, for it reflects certain unique assumptions. These assumptions have been described in the varied writings of numerous specialists in growth and development, philosophy, curriculum, and evaluation. They suggest that:

- Children are different and have different needs.

- Children reflect different backgrounds.

- Children have different purposes and aspirations.

- Motivation is complex and must be varied to reach varying personalities and capacities.

- Groups of children differ, even within a given community or school.

- Teachers are different, and hence all teachers likely cannot direct effectively the same experiences for children.

- Exploratory or research procedures can be employed by teachers which assist them in knowing a group of children.

- It is possible to build school experiences around real concerns of children and youth.

- Teachers can improve their effectiveness.

These are but a few of the assumptions which suggest that the teacher's first job is that of getting to know her class. What are the concerns, interests, hopes, anxieties of these boys and girls? What are their strengths and their weaknesses in the various content areas? What are their homes like and

in what ways could their home and family living be improved? What is their perception of their community and its problems and resources? What is the status of their understanding of life in today's world and of our role as effective, participating citizens in such a world? Such questions have endless leads to the identification of content. The procedure for securing such information may represent a practical research approach to the selection of curriculum content.

In the significant yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, *Adapting the Secondary-School Program to the Needs of Youth*, Tyler discusses two types of needs: those growing out of the drives and tensions of the student and those growing out of the demands of society. Specific procedures are discussed which help teachers translate information about needs into specific teaching goals. These procedures involve a research approach to curriculum development.

Writings in the curriculum field have periodically referred to the need for research in the area of content. A typical statement is found in *Review of Educational Research* (April 1953): "Missing from the research literature are studies of content for the elementary schools designed to answer the basic question: What should children study in the elementary school? Research and discussion have instead centered on the *process* of curriculum development rather than on the *content* of curriculum."⁴

Research procedures may be used for

⁴G. Wesley Sowards and Celia Burns Stendler, "The Content of Early and Middle Childhood Education." *Review of Educational Research* XXIII, No. 2. April 1953. p. 158.

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the purpose of studying or sizing-up groups of children. This may be for a grade level, for an individual class or for small groups within a class. Results might be summarized in terms of trends for the group and would be an aid in determining those characteristics most common to the entire group. This often is useful as a basis for discovering broad areas around which a teacher might work. For example, a home economics teacher found that upon using the *Mooney Problem Check List* with a ninth grade group, the pupils' problems tended to fall in the area of Courtship, Sex and Marriage. This, then, became a group topic and a study was projected around problems in this area. Had their problems fallen in the area of Health and Physical Development, the group's study would likewise have been focused on specific health problems.

The first examples used in this article are illustrative of findings from groups. An English teacher whose students showed a need for freedom from fear when she administered a Self-Portrait needs test, used this as a basis for determining curriculum content. Although she was concerned with the pupil's growth in communication skills, she created many opportunities for individuals and groups to engage in self-understanding as a basis for eliminating fear. A standardized English test was taken and each student was aided in diagnosing his errors. The gross findings of the group were also

analyzed and specific group emphases identified. With specific areas of weaknesses in one phase of their work identified (grammar), the teacher assumed that some basis for eliminating some fear was created. She then engaged in other activities which she hoped would help students with this problem. Illustrative of these activities are:

- a. Each student wrote an autobiography. The class studied autobiographies and decided what should be included in writing their own. They identified eight areas and decided to write a chapter for each area. Each week the group wrote a chapter of his autobiography. Class discussions dealt with concerns which the students raised, events in their experiences, and ways of portraying their feelings about their background. Emphasis was given to outlining, mechanics of writing, and ways of diagnosing errors.

- b. Discussions were held concerning people who had influenced their lives, values and problems. As students revealed fears, these were discussed and efforts made to clarify them.

- c. Panel discussions were planned and presented dealing with local problems of young people. The group was aided in looking at sources of confusion, anxiety and tension.

- d. A school assembly was planned which became a "youth forum."

- e. Individual conferences were held by teachers with students. In many cases this was followed with interviews with resource people in the community, doctors, nurses, ministers and with other teachers. In many cases personal problems were considered which were treated in a confidential manner.

It is interesting to note that students engaged in a variety of experiences which are typical for an English class

(reading autobiographies, writing, outlining, discussion, panels, assemblies, working on specific mechanical skills of writing, spelling). At the same time there was a continuing trend of self-understanding, assessing one's feelings, opening up one's anxieties, and seeking help. The assumption was not made that all fears were eliminated, yet there was evidence of growth in self-understanding, in participation, in adjustment to school and community.

Procedures in Research

Throughout this article an effort has been made to show that many research procedures which aid in identifying student problems and needs are relatively simple and easy to execute. By and large, it becomes a logical and systematic approach to evaluation. Actually, the identification of goals, problems and curriculum activities is an initial phase of the evaluation process. In sizing-up pupils (either as groups or as individuals, the following "research" procedures seem reasonable and can serve as a basis for selecting curriculum content:

1. *Assessment of pupils' academic needs.* This may be done by such activities as:

- a. The use of standardized tests given early in the year (by teachers to their pupils)
- b. Analysis of pupil performance
- c. Analysis of products of students' work
- d. Systematic interviews with other teachers who are currently working with the pupils
- e. Analysis of existing school records and conferences with teachers who prepared such records for clarification and specific information

f. A series of observations of pupils' performance by principal, supervision and parents followed by appropriate summary conferences with the teacher and pupils

2. *Assessment of pupils' interests, attitudes, values*

- a. Observation of students' responses to specific situations
- b. Analysis of a series of writing assignments in which students discuss their feelings, concerns, beliefs
- c. Use of existing tests, such as:
 - (1) Interest Index
 - (2) Science Research Associates, *What I Like To Do*.

3. *Assessment of pupils' emotional needs*

- a. The Wishing Well
- b. Self-Portrait
- c. Long, Long Ago

4. *Assessment of Youth Problems*

- a. Mooney Problem Check List (Junior or Senior High form)
- b. SRA Youth Inventory

5. *Assessment of pupils' skill in critical thinking*

- a. Watson-Glaser, *Critical Thinking Appraisal*
- b. Interpretation of data (various forms)
- c. Logical reasoning

6. *Assessment of pupils' work habits*

- a. Observation in a variety of situations
- b. Science Research Associates, *Can You Find the Answers?*

7. *Assessment of problems of a particular community*

- a. Summary of existing studies
- b. Survey of certain aspects of community life
- c. Pooling of findings from existing resources (agriculture agent, Health Department, occupational studies, etc.)

8. *Analysis of life demands of children and youth in the community*

- a. Analysis of employment opportunities of students
- b. Analysis of home responsibilities
- c. Analysis of community activities
- d. Analysis of school activities

9. *Assessment of past school experiences of the group*

- a. Analysis of school records
- b. Analysis of student responses
- c. Analysis of conferences with other teachers
- d. Analysis of parent interviews

10. *Assessment of available resources for curriculum enrichment*

- a. Identification of competencies available in faculty, parent group and student body
- b. Inventory of vital centers for industry or for facilitating industry in the area
- c. Inventory of historical spots and people in the community who know them
- d. Survey of library resources, educational situations and agencies

11. *Assessment of major research concerning characteristics of the particular age group with which one works*

12. *Assessment of findings of studies of our society and needs and demands it imposes upon effective participation therein.*

The suggested procedures listed above are merely illustrative of approaches to the selection of content. Such procedures are dignified as "research" to the extent that teachers employ systematic, comprehensive and objective procedures to these activities. Results of one test certainly cannot be viewed as a comprehensive accumulation of data. Yet, if such data are

carefully collected, with results viewed as an hypothesis, and validated by subsequent findings, one could have more faith in the process.

In spite of all the procedures listed, doubtless teachers must place greatest weight on a careful and systematic assessment of what they observe and what they hear from their students.

Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of the research potential in identifying content for students is that of recording carefully what was done, bases for such activity and descriptions of progress made. Without such an activity, the process is often lost and future teachers must begin all over again.

Such an approach to curriculum development is often confusing to teachers since it is developmental and hence one cannot block out an entire year's work in advance. Also, it is confusing since many supervisors and principals still adhere to a procedure which is outlined and described as "standard" for a particular grade. This calls for careful involvement of such people in the process. It also calls for continuously interpreting the procedure to all concerned.

Teaching in today's school is an exciting experience. We used to start our automobiles with a crank and primer. Research in technology has brought striking changes in automobiles. Often we fail to recognize that research in the curriculum field has brought about changes which are even more striking. Research activities carried on locally should become the key for the selection of curriculum content.

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