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Curriculum 7

CURRICULUM RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS:

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

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BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

This article is based on our experience of one curriculum project which, following three years of research and development, is now on offer in the educational market place. Given that proposals for curriculum reform differ in their concerns and in their levels of aspiration, we recognise that much of our experience may be idiosyncratic and that all of it has been limited. It may be helpful to suggest that our experience is particularly relevant to curriculum interventions which have the following characteristics:

- (a) They make heavy demands upon the people and institutions engaged in the enterprise.
- (b) They embody value positions which are sufficiently innovatory to mobilise forces of resistance.
- (c) They are so unfamiliar in their design that they pose serious problems of understanding.

Given that the focus of this article is upon barriers to curriculum experiment, we believe that these constitute crucial features of the Humanities Project. This is a national curriculum development project which is very exacting of resources and skills, and is not readily assimilated to existing practice. Its exploratory stage in a limited number of schools enabled the central team to estimate the demands of the programme on the schools in terms of management, resources, roles and relationships. In the diffusion stage, these demands extend outside the school in terms of personnel and resources for training and support programmes.

Despite the title of this article, we are concerned less with conceptions of success than with identifying certain obstacles to experimentation and implementation. We want to look at the anatomy of innovation from the point of view of the pathologist.

There may be a suspicion that the weak points that give rise to failure in curriculum development must lie within the system. But the system is a 'given' and it is for a development team

/to find out

to find out how the system works in order to cope effectively with its characteristics. Curriculum development teams, particularly in America, evince a preference for a pattern of development and diffusion in which a finished programme, by virtue of the prestige and authority of its originators, is carried intact through the diffusion chain to the classroom. This article explores the problems of opting for an alternative plan which is sensitive to the diversity of educational settings and recognises the autonomy of decision makers at different levels of the system.

The Humanities Curriculum Project is an example of this alternative approach. The central assumption of the Project's design is that there can be no effective far-reaching curriculum development without teacher development. It has therefore attempted to share both its research and its development role with participating system personnel. Our experience of the problems encountered in this kind of exercise underlines the need for development teams to pay greater attention to the following:

1. Studying the range of environments in which the programme will eventually be located. In a decentralised system in which individual schools enjoy a great deal of autonomy, this means more than the observation of classrooms. It encompasses the study of institutions and of areas.
2. Communicating effectively the nature of the enterprise. Dilution and distortion of a programme can frequently be traced to the persistence of mistaken assumptions.

What these propositions add up to is a need for an understanding of the school situation. "A new look at teaching, if there is to be one, seems to require us to move up closer to the phenomenon of the teacher's world."** The teacher's world is complex, and it is a heavy responsibility for a development team to set out to recognise (or anticipate) and to work within

/such complexity

** Jackson, Philip W. Life in Classrooms. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968. p. 150.

such complexity, particularly when elements in the compound might be institutional apathy and a generally cautious conservatism. A major point of failure for this paper would be an over-simplification of the reasons why curriculum development fails to have impact.

PROBLEMS OF UNDERSTANDING

Ultimately one must have teachers who participate in the management of their own development. But there is a tendency in curriculum development programmes which are centrally organised for teachers to invest the development team with the kind of authority which can atrophy independence of judgement in individual school settings. Probably some degree of authority or charisma from a body external to the school is necessary to stimulate re-thinking of curriculum activity. Once the development project is under way, however, the authority becomes dysfunctional and can create either a cult or a rebellion; teachers look to the development team for answers, and this reliance on authority implies that there is little independent self-criticism in the innovatory approach. On the other hand, the development team's concern to impart an understanding of procedure as it relates to theory can release the professional judgement and imagination of teachers:

"Failure to grasp underlying principles leads to unintelligent rule-of-thumb application of rules and the inability to make exceptions on relevant grounds and to bewilderment in novel situations."**

Allied to the idea of 'corrosive effects of dependency' is the concept of individuality. While some teachers hesitate at the prospect of self-direction, others are anxious about effacement of personal style through mandatory and narrowly interpreted specifications of method. Curriculum development will not be effective in the long term unless it is seen to be capable of being tailored to the circumstances and temper of particular schools and individual teachers.

/There is often

** 'What is an Educational Process?', R.S. Peters in The Concept of Education (ed. Peters). Routledge and Kegan Paul 1967, p.6.

There is often an assumption that the values of a curriculum development programme are intrinsically good and that it is therefore the task of the school to make the programme succeed. Where the development team is relying, during the preliminary trial period, on feedback from teachers, the reports can be biased in that the teachers interpret difficulty as a reflection on their own competence, or alternatively on the competence of the project, and not as a possible cue to modifying one of the experimental variables. The burden of report forms necessary for feedback can add to unfounded feelings of anxiety and guilt. In experiment, it would seem to be important for people involved to understand that the curriculum developers are the learners and that the school is the teacher.

The Head, or Principal, of the school is such a key figure that effective curriculum development requires of him not merely goodwill but also understanding. From a reasonably full knowledge of the curriculum development he will be able to make appropriate choices in terms of staff, material resources and organisation, to be sensitive to the tensions that invariably arise in the process of innovation, and to provide for the innovating teachers a background of support without dominance.

It is for the development group to anticipate the importance of the nature and quality of the project's early communication with the Head or Principal of the school. For instance, the Head will be concerned about the presentation of the curriculum development exercise within his school, and he may need to be alerted to possible effects of different strategies of organisation and communication. Where the innovating group involves only a small proportion of the total staff, and where it draws high status members, the system will clearly have given recognition to the development exercise and open communication with the system can take place - but at a cost; the norms and pressures of the system are likely to modify the innovation. Where a number of teachers outside the nucleus of innovating teachers can be initially informed and even peripherally involved in the curriculum development, effects of the experiment

/which transfer into other areas

which transfer into other areas of the curriculum are likely to be more favourably regarded. Alternatively, from his knowledge of the climate of opinion within his school, a Head may decide to protect the experiment from general scrutiny until it has developed some degree of autonomy and resistance. It is for the central development team to bring to the notice of the Head or Principal what appear to be crucial points for decision so that he can act autonomously. They must make clear, in those early stages, the need for support from the Head for innovating teachers, and possibly also from meetings with colleagues involved in similar curriculum projects in other schools; it is also the responsibility of the central team to set up ways of helping teachers to interpret and make judgements about the feedback from their own new practices. The capacity for constructive self-criticism is central to the concept of teacher development through curriculum development.

TAKING ACCOUNT OF THE SYSTEM

People who have to make decisions about organisation may do so on the basis of insufficient understanding of the nature of the curriculum development project. It is for the central development team to provide as much information as possible at the stage of diffusion about organisational preconditions and the likely effects of particular patterns of organisation. The following statements are speculative, but would seem, in our experience, to focus on critical areas for decision-making. Our experience suggests that there are two settings which may not be conducive to curriculum development exercise. Heads, recognising these settings in their schools may need to give particular consideration to the desirability of involvement in the development project:

(i) it seems that an experiment settles well in a school where teachers are confronting a problem and contemplating action. The experiment should extend the range of their strategies for dealing with the problem. However, where an internally conceived programme is already well-advanced, involvement in a national curriculum development project either produces bewilderment or results in an exploitation of elements of the national programme with no generalisable experimental data;

/(ii)

(ii) it is sometimes suggested that experiment is more likely to succeed against a background of stability rather than of flux. This may be so; it needs to be looked at carefully. Many schools in England are in process of re-organisation (this generally implies that a secondary school is becoming comprehensive). The new system which emerges may retain or even reinforce the existing values, but it may represent a change of values. Where the hierarchy is likely to be re-shaped through re-organisation, and where teachers are anxious about their future, the tendency may be to demonstrate solidarity with the status quo and not to undertake the risks of innovation - unless the values of that innovation are ones towards which the school is seen to be moving.

A development team which at its exploratory stage stays close to the working context of its operations will encounter a range of institutional phenomena and become aware of the range of concerns which influence curricular action. The unfolding form of the project in particular settings may reveal powerful motivations which are not made explicit.

For instance, it seems that there may be a phenomenon which could be described as innovation without change. A Head or Principal may be beguiled by the cachet of innovation and become involved in a development project without its being esteemed by the power nucleus of the school. The school may try to protect itself from real change by immuring the curriculum development within a small area of the timetable, by involving only one or a few low-status teachers and by providing little opportunity for communication with the rest of the school. Such a phenomenon is consistent with the growing concern of schools - and particularly English secondary modern schools - to improve their "brand image" through external appearances such as school uniform. On this analogy, innovation without change involves merely a modification in the packaging of the curriculum and does not necessarily involve the school in any concern with modification of content.

/In assessing the change

In assessing the change potential of the project, the developers need to understand what are the major concerns of teachers. For instance, the question of social control is often a dominant feature of teacher sub-culture and will probably be a concealed criterion in a school's examination of the aims and effects of the curriculum development. Where curriculum development works towards changing student/teacher relationships, it can be important that the difficulty of the task facing the school be estimated from an approximate identification of the school's position on a custodial-humanistic-continuum of attitudes towards pupil control.

"A custodial pupil ideology stresses the maintenance of order, distrust of students, and a punitive, moralistic approach to pupil control. A humanistic ideology emphasises an accepting, trustful view of pupils and optimism concerning their ability to be self-disciplining and responsible."**

Many schools have not clearly articulated their own ideological stand, and part of the problem is to help a Head to analyse the situation in such a way that he can predict the unique effects which a curriculum development exercise, clearly described, is likely to have within his school.

If the curriculum development experiment demands an un-learning of teaching habits, then it can initially breed diffidence. Habits are "comfortable, predictable and anxiety-free". In the early stages of experiment there will be periods when progress is becalmed. It takes time to learn to handle a new tool and it will appear less effective than the one it replaces until the practitioner comes to know its potential and to feel confident in the new style. This is probably even true of the introduction of a new text book. Dr. Louis J. Rubin, of the University of California, Santa Barbara has described this initial decrease in effectiveness as an inverse Hawthorne effect.

/Pressures on the individual

** Donald J. Willower from a Paper presented at a Faculty Seminar, Temple University, May 1968, and published in Samplings, Vol. 1.1, No. 3 (April 1968) pp.45-60.

Pressures on the individual teacher and on the school as a whole may be great. It may be that the school which can best cope with experiment is one where there is some slack in the system. In practice, teachers generally are so concerned with system maintenance that their energy is spent in running to keep up with the status quo. Innovation needs time: time for teachers to familiarise themselves with any new teaching materials; time to reflect individually and with colleagues on new experiences. Louis Rubin argues that any school can, if it values curriculum development, make time for the professional growth of its staff; but it is not unknown in this country for teachers involved in experiment to lose free time as the price of enthusiasm. It is in their managerial role that Heads may need assistance.

In organisational backing, it is the little things, such as plugs for tape-recorders and shelving for materials which can mean a lot. Lack of foresight here can have absurdly far-reaching effects, and it is for the central development team to ensure, through adequate communication, that decision-makers have foresight rather than merely hindsight.

Enthusiasm is no substitute for inadequate resource support. If the organisation specification has been made known to Heads, it is their responsibility to see that the pattern of implementation and support is adequate. There is a misconception of curriculum heroism that boasts: "the experiment demands small classes of pupils, but we are game enough to try even with our large groups". Equally out of tune with the nature and conduct of experiment is the Head who believes in the spartan test of experiment proving itself in the very worst conditions: "if it works here, it will work anywhere". But the first task in the preliminary trial period is to see what is possible in normal conditions. Only then can the programme's tolerance to different kinds of organisational disadvantage be productively studied.

Care with the selection of rooms and resources will release teachers from peripheral anxieties and unnecessary fatigue which, in an intellectually demanding exercise, can quickly lower morale.

A NOTE ON CONTINUITY AND TRAINING.

If the lessons of experience are learned they will influence the structure and emphasis of diffusion patterns. This final section focusses on precautions against the dilution of the project as it is widely introduced and as responsibility for communication is invested in points increasingly more remote from the centre.

- (a) Communication: the development team needs to give thought to the language of communication. A central team working closely together and with its experimental teachers will inevitably build up an in-group set of words and phrases which function as a relieve map to the project's thinking. In time, as novel insights are more confidently identified, language hardens into an efficient in-group shorthand. Familiarity diminishes the expectation of misinterpretation, and either new phrases and new uses of old words will have to be carefully defined against present understandings, or simple longhand equivalents will need to be traced out. The inbred language of the early stages of experiment will not meet the needs of the diffusion of curriculum development.

If Philip Jackson's propositions are sound, the problem of language is still more complex. His observations in schools led him to conclude that the teacher subculture discourse tends to be relatively free of technical terms: "The absence of technical terms is related to another aspect of teachers' talk: its conceptual simplicity. Not only do teachers avoid elaborate words, they also seem to shun elaborate ideas Four aspects of the conceptual simplicity revealed in teachers' language are worthy of comment. These are:

1. an uncomplicated view of causality
2. an intuitive rather than rational approach to classroom events
3. an opinionated as opposed to an open-minded stance when confronted with alternative technique practice.

4. a narrowness in the working definitions assigned to abstract terms." *

This has implications for a curriculum project which aims at development through teacher understanding and which does not give careful thought to the uses and effects of its language of communication.

Communication presents hazards at all stages of a curriculum enterprise, for there is no standardised method of describing curriculum projects for people (Heads, local authorities) who have to make decisions about them. Moreover, no relevant typology of schools has received wide enough currency for it to be used in conjunction with descriptions of curriculum projects in order to anticipate the goodness of fit.

- (b) Training: where there is, in the structure or ethos of the system, no precedent for quality control - where materials are not withdrawn from schools which are judged not to be meeting the specifications of the development team, and where certificates of proficiency are not awarded or withheld at the close of a training course, there can be a fairly rapid distortion of the development project. The hazard throws a heavy burden on training courses and the after-care service.

The central development team will probably have a limited life span. Major responsibility for continuity may be invested in a newly-formed national centre, in institutions concerned with teacher training, or in local areas through ad hoc groups based on teachers' centres. The decision points for the development team will include these:

1. what are the criteria for the selection of trainers?
do teachers working in participating schools make the best trainers or teachers?
- ii. in what respects should a programme to train trainers differ from a programme to train teachers?
- iii. what are the comparative advantages of
 - (a) a system with one trained teacher of 'facilitator' in each school who will be responsible for training and giving support to other teachers in that school.

- (b) a system whereby a nucleus of trainers inducts interested teachers, on an area basis, at locally organized courses?
- iv. under what circumstances are intensive training courses more effective than an extended course of regular short sessions?
 - v. what rewards are desirable and feasible for teachers acting as trainers?
 - vi. do Heads and local authorities fully recognise the need for participating teachers to have time for professional growth; time for individual study and reflection; time for in-school discussion with experimental colleagues; time for occasional meetings with experimental teams from other schools in the area?

The development team should also ask whether the tendency to ascribe authority to them (with subsequent reduction of teacher initiative) is likely to be replicated at local level and, if so, how this effect can be combated through the presentation of the experiment at the training courses.

Where emphasis is placed on the development of teachers, training may be an inappropriate word. It is a truism that training limits the options open while education extends them. As R B Peters suggests:

'The Spartans for instance, were military and morally trained. They knew how to fight; they knew what was right and wrong; they were possessed of a certain kind of lore, which stood them in good stead in stock situations. They were thus able to comb their hair with aplomb when the Persians were approaching at Thermopylae. But we could not say that they had received a military or a moral education; for they had never been able to understand the principles underlying their code. They had mastered the content of forms of thought and behaviour without ever grasping or being able to operate with the principles that would enable them to manage on their own.' *

In an article which lays emphasis on teacher development, it is perhaps appropriate to leave the last word with Professor Peters.

* op.cit. p.6.