Some Reflections on Cooperative Action Research

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"Cooperative action research," these authors state, "can be expected to produce principles of action—middle-ground principles—as its major outcome. And it is precisely these principles that are required by those of us who must deal with the day-to-day reality of children, teachers, schools and educational goals."

Cooperative action research is the name of a process intended to improve action systematically. In this paper, we wish to state and elaborate certain concepts that must be clarified as this process continues to be studied. We shall place certain terms in relationship: reality, valuing, cultural expectations, and the development of principles.

Testing by Reality

Cooperative action research is an approach to making what we do consistent with what we believe. It is an attempt to deduce what is necessary to improve a real situation through a systematic examination of the situation itself. It cannot, therefore, be planned in the absence of a real situation; it must function in the presence of reality. The research pattern evolves as teacher and consultant test their perceptions of a real situation against data obtained from the situation itself. In this sense, cooperative action research is constantly tested by reality.

One's notion of what is real is compounded from one's values, as they operate, and whatever preconceptions concerning what is real one has accumulated. Thus, one's perception of the school curriculum is heavily influenced by personal values, and also by what one has been led to think a school curriculum is.

The reality that is of most concern to teachers and consultants is, of course, boys and girls learning and growing in school. This reality is children laughing at one another; it is the giving and receiving of report cards; the faculty meeting that no one liked; the unit of work that really succeeded (or didn't). It is the recognizable interaction that makes up a school.

Practical, immediate problems growing out of this reality lead the consultant and the teacher, working together, to the gathering of data that will aid clarification of the problem. The interpretation of these data leads to an expression of some opinion concerning ways the problem may be studied further, or solved. But all of this is undertaken while the action continues, and within the practical, everyday setting in which the action is located. That is, it takes place in a real situation, with all the stresses and contradictions of reality operating. All the unknown factors are in the action research, exerting...
whatever force they usually have. They are not scrubbed out in the process of "cleaning up" the problem. Such scrubbing strips the situation of its real meaning. Reality is messy. Scrub it up, and you've made it into something else.

To keep our research practical, we have to have a pattern of inquiry that permits these unknown factors to have their effect. Cooperative action research is such a pattern.

Suppose, for example, that a school staff has identified tardiness as a problem around which some cooperative action research is to be undertaken. It is decided to silence the school bell during passing periods. But complications develop. Other school staffs disapprove; some members of this school staff scoff at the idea; an angry letter is written to the superintendent. At this point the activity is no longer strictly experimental; it is something that must be defended. More than tardiness is now at stake. If the relationship among the researchers is really cooperative, this situation can be used for further research, rather than abandoned. Look at the food for thought in what has happened! Data are now available on such important action problems as relationships with the public, the dynamics of the school staff, how to work successfully with the superintendent, and so on. If the staff will only look at what has happened, the chances are very good that they will come quickly to examine problems of great significance to them.

In this cooperative relationship, the action research consultant faces a special risk—that of distorting his perception of what is real, while thinking about it in isolation. There is a dilemma here. All the participants in the research must both be in the situation and reflect upon it. But for the consultant, the risk is especially severe that in the course of reflecting upon it, he will distort his perception of the situation to fit some preconception.

Thus, one of the present writers decided that the difficulties identified by a group of teachers all arose from an authoritarian school climate. Having so judged the situation, he could not continue to cooperate openly with the staff. He had made a judgment he could not report to them, and his judgment led him to make private interpretations of their subsequent problems. This being so, his relationship with the staff rapidly became less and less important both to him and the staff members and he eventually lost contact with them. Later events showed him that had he not lost contact with the staff, he and they might have captured an opportunity to study something of great significance—what factors lead many teachers to behave in an authoritarian manner in spite of themselves.

Making Values Explicit

Any action represents an attempt to apply values to reality. We ordinarily are aware of reality through the application of our notions and scientific principles. But we frequently are unaware of the way our own values are operating as we choose among alternative actions. Whenever we choose among alternative ways of acting, we
choose on the basis of values, whether they are conscious or not. Teachers choose all the time, and the values on which their choices are made are central to their teaching. We cannot choose whether or not to have values; we can choose only whether or not to attempt making them explicit. In the degree that this attempt is successful, we reduce the number of unknown factors operating in cooperative action research.

Most of us were brought up to believe that research must be objective, and that personal or group bias destroys objectivity. Bias is a hidden preference that grows out of experience and basic personality structure of which we are frequently unconscious. These sources of hidden preferences and their effects upon behavior are inevitable. To reduce bias, the process of valuing itself must be examined by the researcher, who, through this examination, may hope to make values conscious and thus avoid distortion of his perceptions. The importance of conscious valuing arises from two considerations: first, if research is to be significant to the researchers, it must align with their values; second, as has been indicated, unconscious valuing may operate in a capricious, hidden manner. Making values explicit enhances the probability of the first of these, and reduces the danger of the second. At two points in the research process, deliberately making values conscious will have a desirable influence on the significance and utility of research: at the beginning, when hypotheses are formed, and at the end, when implications for action are explored.

At the beginning of an action research process, it is crucially important that careful effort be made to make explicit the values of the participants, because these values determine whether the hypotheses formulated are significant to the participants. For example, if I don't value expressiveness and creativity in children, hypotheses about these things are not significant to me.

When a significant hypothesis has been stated, the researcher adopts techniques for testing it that are as unbiased—as free from unconscious personal or group value—as possible. He submits to the principles of evidence. He attempts to gather data that describe the whole of what is relevant to the hypothesis, including possibilities repugnant to him. When these data are examined, again the researcher tries to adopt a mode of examination that allows what is repugnant to him to appear and be studied. Once the data are objectively gathered and analyzed, however, and it is time to state implications, the researcher must make choices, and his values operate.

However, if this inevitable interaction between personal and group values and the research process is to be more than capricious and accidental, values must be stated. It should be observed that ordinarily they are not stated, but rather are left submerged, to operate without much deliberate control.

In a cooperative action research project, failure to make values explicit often leads to an apparently aimless shifting of interest instead of an orderly evolution of activity. In any case, values, rather than surface logic, control what is studied. For this reason, values
determine the persistent direction for research.

**Role of Cultural Values**

Cultural values, as well as personal values, influence curriculum research, especially when teachers and others are cooperating to improve what is done in school. These cultural values may not be violated. They limit what may be undertaken. We shall mention four of them.

First, *usefulness.* The purpose of curriculum experimentation must be to add (or improve) something useful, or to remove something useless. Parents allow experimentation with classroom committees, for example, only as they see group skills and positive social attitudes as useful to children.

Second, *way-of-life.* Experimentation that might make a child too different from others is intolerable. Similarly, we may not (nor would we want to) risk destroying a child's reverence, or the liking of his fellows.

Third, *psychological security of the parent.* We may not experimentally (even by accident) risk having a destructive effect on parent-child relationships. When a parent cannot understand the ideas a child learns at school, he is threatened, and behaves accordingly. When a teacher, for example, tolerates some minor "sassiness" in order to have a permissive climate in class, many a parent is threatened and shouts "poor discipline."

Fourth, *educational welfare.* A proposed experiment, to be allowed, must hold the promise of an improved child. Mere surveying of the achievement of children without using the results for improving teaching may be rejected by parents, who call it a waste of time. The educational welfare of the child must be safeguarded in the experimental process, or this value is violated.

Participants in cooperative action research have the task of locating these boundaries as they really are. In the process, they should seek the help of parents and others who guard the boundaries. Failure to do so sometimes leads to retribution.

Valuing enters into the cooperative action research process at several points. If we are to make such research realistic and practical, it is imperative that both the values of the researchers and of the culture be made concrete and visible, and that continued attention be given them as the research process unfolds.

**Breaking Some Cultural Stereotypes**

Participants in cooperative action research need to recognize that this kind of activity requires them to change their expectations of one another. A figure in our culture called "the expert" is likely to intervene in the research process in which teachers and consultants are attempting to work on the basis of close cooperation. When teachers make the assumption that the expert can tell them what their problems are and how they can solve them, cooperative action research is blocked.

Blockage likely occurs because the first task of the participants is to reach a mutual understanding of the nature of the situation. This task requires them to postpone organizing the situation for research until they have achieved a functionally similar understanding of the important variables. Such achievement requires of the consultant that he conduct himself with
great humility and that at the outset he honestly profess ignorance of the situation. Such a humble approach violates the cultural stereotype of the expert. Evidence is provided that the stereotype is undergoing change as teachers in the situation increasingly become involved in describing their situation to the expert.

Other cultural stereotypes need to be modified. One is that teachers cannot do research. This stereotype is based on two assumptions: teachers may assume that they cannot do research; administrators and experts on curriculum may assume that teachers cannot do research. These assumptions are usually modified as teachers become experienced in research.

A second stereotype is that the teacher does not possess sufficient freedom in the situation to make a change in it. Teachers frequently possess in fact greater autonomy than they think they have.

A third notion which has to change is that leadership is a status function. This stereotype has to shift so that leadership is seen as an inter-personal or group function in which the teacher may participate as well as the consultant and administrator.

In the fourth place the teachers' assumptions about the nature of research need to change if cooperative action research is to flourish. The direction of the desirable shift is toward the idea that the teaching situation is a laboratory possessing the necessary resources for doing research. Although additional procedures such as the use of specially designed measuring instruments may have to be added, nevertheless the classroom possesses potentially the essential conditions and tools for the conduct of research.

The success of cooperative action research depends upon a reconstruction of the school's social culture which embodies assumptions and expectations such as those that we have described. The reconstruction of the school's social culture is thus an outcome of cooperative action research. By examining the changes that have taken place over a period of time in the school's culture one may grasp the contribution that research has made to the improvement of the curriculum.

It is urgent that attention be given to the process whereby the social culture of the school is changed. As is true with any subculture in a community, the school subculture possesses a great force for perseverance. The assumptions and expectations among people interlock them with one another in such a fashion that their culture has a tenacious life of its own. A few may honestly desire change but people generally resist change. Resistance and counter-moves for protecting the status quo are to be expected. Therefore, when such culture stereotypes as those we have mentioned are in the process of being broken it is important that the people involved comprehend what is happening and prepare themselves for the consequences. For example, the consultant may be accused of insincerity, or teachers may surprise their superintendent by asking for something they have never requested before—school time for meetings.

Having described what must happen to the school's culture if cooperative action research is to become a normal operation we now turn to suggestions for meeting and managing the problems.
that are involved. The first consideration is that assumptions and expectations have to be communicated before they can be changed. Such communication requires a permissive atmosphere.

Second, the assumptions and expectations that are presently operating in a situation have to be examined and validated. Likewise, this requires a permissive atmosphere in which people, without hurt, can be objective toward one another.

Third, as cultural stereotypes are being broken the participants involved in cooperative action research need to explore the breaking-up process itself. This exploration needs to be regulated and carried on at the level of conscious attention. For example, as cultural stereotypes are being broken people become insecure and act as insecure people act. Some person involved in the process must understand that people are acting out of their insecurity and comprehend what is causing the particular behaviors of people manifested in the situation. Here the skills and understandings of the consultant very likely become strategic.

At this stage the behavior of the consultant is crucial. As cultural stereotypes shift in a situation where people are undertaking cooperative action research it is usually first the consultant and then a status leader, such as a principal, whose behaviors come under fire. They must be prepared, for example, to accept hostility and even moves by associates to set aside temporarily their influence and potency in the situation.

After assumptions and expectations about the role of the consultant and perhaps the principal are settled, the behavior of any person who shows an unusual amount of anxiety requires the attention of the group.

If the consultant can contain his feelings enough to protect others from the expression of his own anxieties, it is more likely that cultural stereotypes will change, and a new and more functional set of assumptions about people will become established.

Crucial to the favorable outcome of the process of examining cultural stereotypes is human relations skill and understanding exercised by the people who are involved. It is at this point that the importance of group work and the reason for improving group functioning enter the process of cooperative action research. Group work is important because it gives people an opportunity to evaluate their assumptions of one another and to set new and more valid expectations for one another. A recognition of the social psychological forces at work as people try to cooperate is the crux of cooperative action research.

**Producing “Middle-Ground” Principles**

The appropriate outcome of cooperative action research is the development of principles of analysis and method. These principles are related both to statements of fundamental theory and to real situations like those mentioned above. They stand between the two. They are “middle-ground” principles.

Middle-ground principles are action statements. They relate directly to the recognizable problem as it is usually seen. To be helpful, they must be stated in the same terms the teacher uses to describe the learning problems
of a real child. The teacher's problem is how to figure out why a child is having trouble (analysis), and what she should do about it (method). Middle-ground principles are principles of analysis and method.

We teachers are now operating on the basis of certain fundamental principles of teaching and learning. The success of their application depends on whether the principles of analysis and method that lie between fundamental principles and action itself have been developed. Some have been developed in detail; others have not.

Take the principle of readiness, for example. The idea that there is such a thing as readiness has great and immediate appeal. It is one of the great principles of learning, so true that it is almost self-evident, yet so sophisticated that it had to be discovered and proclaimed. When this fundamental principle is applied to reading, classroom teachers can deal with it because during the past two generations it has been studied with sufficient attention to reality to provide a set of "middle-ground" principles. Teachers can apply the principle of readiness to many reading problems; they can apply it to writing; many primary grade teachers can apply it to determine rather subtle readinesses for various kinds of communication activity.

But the same is not at all true with respect to readiness for other kinds of subject matter, such as arithmetic. And such middle-ground principles are almost wholly lacking with respect to our understanding of children's readiness for the various kinds of social interaction.

How can we apply such fundamental ideas as "readiness" to problems of social development in ordinary classrooms? Questions like this are answerable only through action research. Through massive action research programs, we can hope for the gradual emergence of statable middle-ground principles that will allow us to make use of this fundamental idea in our day-by-day teaching. As things stand, we simply don't know how to use it.

The same thing might be said about other fundamental principles now available to us. The many studies of human relationships have given us principles of mental health, now useful primarily to psychiatrists. Many of us are trying, with varying degrees of success, to use them in classroom situations. But it is obvious that the same operating principles that can be used by a psychiatrist with a client cannot be used by a teacher with a class. We will have to develop our own principles for classroom application of the principles of mental health.

We have considered some needs. Now let us consider some accomplishments.

Hilda Taba (in Diagnosing Human Relations Needs) suggests the means by which teachers may discover the human relations needs in their own classes, and in the process carry on learning experience significant to children. She has in effect offered some middle-ground principles: some operational generalizations.

Ruth Cunningham and Associates (in Understanding the Group Behavior of Boys and Girls) re-examine social climates in schools. When they call "authoritarian" by the name "teacher rule-child obedience," they have at once
described the phenomenon so that it can be recognized in a classroom, and also contributed significantly to the meaning of the fundamental idea of authoritarian climate as it is expressed in an elementary classroom. They have entered the middle ground that exists between Lewin and Lippitt on the one hand, and the thousands of us who are concerned about the way these ideas work in the classroom, on the other hand. These researchers have put tools in our hands that allow us to achieve purposes only partly indicated by the developers of the fundamental insights.

Cooperative action research, then, can be expected to produce principles of action—middle-ground principles—as its major outcome. And it is precisely these principles that are required by those of us who must deal with the day-to-day reality of children, teachers, schools and educational goals.

National Training Laboratory in Group Development

The National Training Laboratory in Group Development will hold its usual three-week summer laboratory session at Gould Academy, Bethel, Maine. The dates will be from June 21 through July 11.

Approximately 110 applicants will be accepted for this session. Persons involved in problems of working with groups in a training, consultant, or leadership capacity in any field are invited to apply.

The purpose of the training program is to sensitize leaders in all fields to the existence and nature of the dynamic forces operating in the small group and to help them gain skill in operating more effectively in such a group. The training program is organized so that each trainee group of 15-20 persons is enabled to use its own experience as a laboratory example of group development. Group skills of analysis and leadership are practiced through the use of role-playing and observer techniques. Concentrated clinics give training in the skills of the consultant and the trainer in human relations skills. There is also opportunity to explore the role of the group in the larger social environment in which it exists. Finally, a major portion of the last week of the Laboratory is spent in specific planning and practicing application of Laboratory learnings to back-home jobs.

The Laboratory research program in group behavior and training methods is an important part of the training, and the use of research tools which are within the range of the Laboratory training program is incorporated into the curriculum.

The NTLGD is sponsored by the Division of Adult Education Service of the NEA and by the Research Center for Group Dynamics of the University of Michigan, with the cooperation of faculty members from the universities of Chicago, Illinois, California, Ohio State, Antioch College, Teachers College at Columbia University, and other educational institutions. Its year-round research and consultation program is supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. For further information, write to the NTLGD at 1201 Sixteenth Street, N. W., Washington 6, D. C.