



ACCESSS



## The Critical Need for Teachers as Researchers

by Mary Catherine Swanson, AVID Founder

When I initiated AVID at Clairemont High School in the San Diego Unified School District in 1980, I knew that I would need to keep careful data on students' progress or I would not be allowed to continue teaching such an experimental course. Although I was clear on my goal—to qualify underachieving, disadvantaged students for four-year universities—I was not certain that I would have immediate success; therefore, I kept every piece of information available in both affective and effective domains.

I also found that it was important to involve the faculty in site-based research. This need became apparent during the early AVID site team meetings. So many teachers were devoted to

practices with students that they thought were effective, but they didn't have the evidence to know that the practices were efficacious. In fact, some of the practices were downright detrimental to students.

For example, the history department found that the standardized reading scores of AVID students were not as high as those of other students enrolled in their courses. The department proposed adopting dual texts with different reading levels and different colored book covers as well. Because everyone would know that AVID students were considered less intelligent by the history teachers, and because the students would not be challenged with difficult text, I was opposed to the proposal. Nevertheless, as chair of

the English department, I was hardly in a position to dictate to the history department. Therefore, I convinced the history department to use the more difficult texts in two class sections and the dual texts in another and compare student results. Thank goodness, when students with the difficult text out-performed the others, the department was convinced to adopt one text only. Had the department not been involved in its own research, they would have persisted in a deleterious practice.

At the outset, I was unaware of how important site-based research would be. As a classroom teacher, I had always practiced unsophisticated forms of research with my

*Continued on page 2*

## DR. HUGH MEHAN: Research and the AVID Classroom

Since 1972, Dr. Hugh Mehan has directed the Teacher Education Program at the University of California at San Diego. That alone gives him insight into the challenges and opportunities facing educators today. However, Mehan brings a unique perspective to his work, having received his Ph.D. in sociology and continuing to work in that discipline. In fact, when not publishing articles in *The Harvard Educational Review*, along with lecturing, and

writing and editing books for an educational audience, he studies discourse—that is, the impact of language on behavior. In addition, Mehan is concerned about the process by which sociological analysis becomes social action, and he presents his findings to sociologists, anthropologists, and educators throughout the U.S.

"My training in sociology has led me to look at the education world in a different way," he says. "The type of sociology I was

raised on emphasized the 'sociological imagination,' combining social analysis with social action."

Still, it is the educational system that occupies much of Mehan's time. The Teacher Education Program at UCSD certifies some 60 teachers a year for both elementary and secondary service, and Mehan has engaged in studies of classroom organization, testing, tracking, and technology, along with supervising the program. It

*Continued on page 3*

*Mehan continued from page 1*  
was his interest in both teaching practice and sociology that led him to begin studying the AVID Program in 1986. This extensive undertaking will culminate in his latest book, *Constructing School Success: The Consequences of Untracking Low Achieving Students*, based on Mehan's three-year study of eight AVID programs. Publication by Cambridge University Press is set for the winter of 1995.

Though Mehan's study of AVID relied on careful analysis and produced compelling data, his initial meeting with AVID Director Mary Catherine Swanson was accidental.

"I had heard about AVID and knew it was a program that operated under the new concept of rigorous instruction for all students," he recalls. "But I knew very little about it at the time,

around 1986. It happened that Mary Catherine was invited to be a guest speaker in one of our teacher preparation classes at UCSD, and the instructor of the class couldn't be there to introduce her, so I had to fill in. I sat through her talk and thought 'Wow!' Afterwards, I approached her and said I might be interested in researching the AVID Program."

Funded by the Center for Cultural Diversity, the first research document, "Untracking and College Enrollment," appeared in 1992, and became the impetus for several subsequent studies. For the first major book about AVID, Mehan and his team of researchers—Irene Villanueva, Lea Hubbard, Angela Lintz, Dina Okamoto, and James Adams—visited AVID classrooms at eight sites, and interviewed teachers, parents, and administrators, along with 250 AVID students.

Their book poses questions and draws conclusions regarding AVID's influence on the effort to untrack schools, organizational processes that influence untracking, peer influences, and parental impact on student performance. They employed a concept Mehan calls "social scaffolding," a key factor in raising the expectations and performance of disadvantaged and underrepresented students and an aspect of AVID that separates it from other programs.

When not teaching, lecturing, writing, or editing, Dr. Mehan finds time to jog, cross country ski, and coach soccer for his children Michael, 14, and Megan, 11, both of whom are public school students in north San Diego County. In the summer, he and his wife, Margaret Riel, a specialist in educational networking by  
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*Teachers continued from page 2*

4. *Reporting of results.* Almost all research conducted, however informally, will be useful at the site and important discussion material for the AVID site team; nevertheless, Sagor emphasizes the importance of finding more public forums for reporting the results. "If teaching is to be a profession," he argues, "then teachers must play a role in knowledge formation."

5. *Action planning.* Finally, teachers decide a course of action based on their findings. Experience tells me that the appropriate action will be obvious, but a word of caution. In education we have consistently "reinvented the wheel." A wonderful activity for your site team is a brief study of the professional literature regarding the subject of your research before you decide on your action. Teachers at one local high school

in San Diego were anxious for students to be successful in algebra and decided to solve the problem by reenrolling students in first semester algebra until they passed, when knowledge of research would have encouraged them to address instruction rather than remediating.

A major benefit of research is that it is impersonal. And when teachers have data to examine, concerns are difficult to refute. In an era of teacher empowerment, site-based management, and assessment-driven education, teacher research is a necessity. In the school restructuring movement, too many schools have adopted new courses of study, altered school schedules, or adopted educational programs because they sounded good, rather than knowing the new practice was based on research.

Public education is under fire, and if public school teachers are not able to support their actions with quantitative and qualitative data, the public is going to turn elsewhere for "the answers" to the educational dilemma. The dissemination of AVID has relied on careful research. I cannot encourage you strongly enough to continue to provide for the AVID Center the data requested and to be engaged in your own site-based research. The future of educating our students well depends on it.

Note: *How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research*, by Richard Sagor, was published in 1992. Stock no. 611-93011. Price \$6.95.