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the design and evaluation of an in-service course for school principals

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I. Introduction

The preparation of educational administrators is a field of professional education which until recently was almost entirely neglected in South Africa. This neglect is possibly associated with such factors as the traditional closed and bottom-heavy career structure and secure tenure system of South African teachers; the civil service tradition of Provincial educational bureaucracies, constraining the growth of professional autonomy; the absence until recently of models of high level managerial education at South African universities; and the philosophical — rather than sociological — orientation of Faculties of Education.

Whatever the causes, the task of the educational administrator remains an amateur one, guided by folk wisdom, precedent, prescription or personal vision. The role of school principal is particularly diffuse and elastic, and its mysteries are to be learnt through experience.

This situation is changing with each new Provincial in-service course for principals and with each new course in the sociology of educational institutions or educational administration at University Education Departments, and no doubt in time master's degrees and doctorates in educational administration will become as academically respectable and as professionally essential in South Africa as in the United States and Canada.

At a time of innovation it may be of value to describe one approach to in-service education in school administration, that of simulation, and show the reception such an approach has had from a group of South African school principals.

II. A Workshop in Primary School Administration

In January 1970 a workshop in primary school administration was held for 30 principals and aspiring principals, under the auspices of the Department of Extra-mural Studies of the University of Cape Town. This was the first course for principals to be offered by the University and probably the first course in school administration in South Africa to use the simulation and in-basket techniques recently developed in America and Britain as the main learning experience.

The workshop was designed to involve all participants in a variety of learning situations in order to enable them

(1) to gain a deeper understanding of organisational processes within an educational institution and, in particular, to clarify and develop their conceptions of the role of the school principal.

(2) to see more clearly their own behaviour and its effects on others.

(3) to develop ideas, attitudes and skills that would lead to desirable innovations in their own schools.

12 Principals, 3 vice-principals, 13 senior assistants and assistant teachers, 1 college director of teacher education and 1 director of in-service education for Bantu teachers attended the workshop. 23 Participants were drawn from the Cape Peninsula, 5 from Port Elizabeth, 1 from Pretoria and 1 from the Transkei.

The course leaders were three educationists from the University of Cape Town. Their task was to stimulate, clarify, question and encourage rather than present information or viewpoints, and in using the conceptual

framework of their different perspectives to provide models of analytic rather than prescriptive thinking.

The traditional elements of the course — a programme of afternoon lectures dealing at a theoretical level with such topics as the role of the principal, innovation in curriculum and method within the school, classification and grouping, and the organisation and functions of staff meetings — need not be discussed, but the process of learning by simulation and analysis — the in-basket technique — needs some explanation.

III. Liesbeek Primary: A Simulated School

'Liesbeek Primary' is a simulated school, the framework for an extended case-study or educational game. It is to be played both individually and in teams. The rules are too complicated to be stated. In fact, the point of the game lies in discovering them.

'Liesbeek Primary' is a co-educational, White, English-medium school in a suburb of Cape Town. It has 429 pupils in 13 classes, 12 teachers, a vice-principal, a principal and a janitor. It is imbedded in a socially mixed community and has the usual liaison with the Cape Education Department. Its staff are no less competent or co-operative than average though there are among them marked differences in age, attitude and experience. Its pupils reflect all shades of intelligence and social class, and those of their parents who take an active interest in their schooling do so for a host of reasons. It is a busy school and bustles with administrative problems.

Playing the game means administering the school for a week, assuming the role of principal, coping with the problems that are thrown up daily, comparing one's performance with that of other participants, and justifying one's judgements or changing one's mind. It is a length exercise in decision-making and in human relations.

Participants begin a typical workshop day by being faced with the contents of their morning in-basket: notes from teachers, letters from parents, memos from the Director of Education, schemes of work, journal articles, jottings of phone messages — complaints, suggestions, requests, instructions, some possibly trivial, others fundamental in their implications, all presented in as realistic a way as possible.

Stage I: Individual work on in-baskets

The contents of each morning's in-basket are dealt with in three stages. First, each course member, without consulting any other, browses through the material, rearranging it, classifying it, deciding what is important and what is not, what requires immediate attention and what may be deferred. Twenty items probably boil down to about a dozen problems each of which requires some decision from the principal, even a decision to do nothing. During the first stage these decisions are made and recorded on response-sheets under two headings (a) immediate action and (b) long-term goals. This is essentially a solitary exercise. No course member is expected to know what decisions another has made on the same problem with the same information. His own decisions are recorded in black and white in front of him and he will have to live with them as he moves into stage two.

Stage 2: Small-Group Discussions

In stage two, course members form into small discussion groups, each with a tutor, and together look at some of the problems on which they have all reached individual decisions. This is the stage when judgements are questioned and justified, reasonings examined and criticised, evidence marshalled and re-interpreted, values and assumptions exposed and compared. Any conflicting decision obliges the student to rethink his own course of action and either modify it or justify it as at least an adequate alternative. Discussion is frank and vigorous, "poor" decisions are given short shrift, students begin to become aware of different styles of leadership among their neighbours and some grow more self-conscious and critical of their own decision-making.

Stage 3: Plenary Session

The third stage is the plenary session when small groups dissolve and all course members meet together with tutors to attempt to pin down the key issues arising from the morning's in-basket, to discuss different administrative procedures that had been observed, and to examine concepts and prin-

ciples, derived mainly from sociology and organisation theory, which might illuminate the organisational processes of the school. Here is a chance, too, to discover the reaction of other groups to a particularly intricate problem or to gauge the measure of consensus on questions of value that have troubled one's own group.

This is the three-stage attack on the daily in-basket. Because of lack of time the first stage came to be regarded as homework and the mornings began with small group discussions. There was some attempt to so plan the contents of each in-basket that one or two areas of school administration were emphasised each day.

On Monday the main themes were the exercise of authority inside and outside the school and the degree of freedom of staff to take initiatives of various kinds; on Tuesday, conflict between conservative and progressive approahes to teaching and testing, the reorganisation of school examination procedures and the revision of the form of school report sent to parents; on Wednesday, conflict and communication with parents, issues arising from moral and religious education, and the application of school rules; and on Thursday, problems of classification and grouping. These are some of the more important areas of concern: a far wider range of topics than this was covered by 63 in-basket items.

Though the areas of concern differed from day to day the organisational processes did not. Methods of communication, delegation of responsibility, resolution of conflict, the exercise of authority and means of producing change and innovation were constantly discussed as Liesbeek Primary was gradually knocked or nursed into some shape different from that in which it was found.

IV. Evaluation of the Workshop

The in-basket approach was chosen in preference to other methods of teaching because of the degree of interest this method had been shown to arouse (Cruickshank, 1966) and because it seemed presumptuous to lecture to principals on school administration. They, if anyone, were the experts. What was wanted was a situation where they could practise their expertise, self-consciously and critically, share it with others, and obtain feedback from others. Educational administration was seen as a never-ending series of judgements involving skilful interpretation of evidence and flexibility in relating means to ends. Most important, it was a 'human' activity concerned with effective leadership of colleagues, parents and pupils in pursuit of valid educational goals. Further, what was needed was an approach that seemed relevant to practical and busy people, one that discouraged arid distinctions between theory and practice, while encouraging discrimination in a pragmatic way between good and bad theory.

The over-all goal of the workshop was a presumptuous one: to improve administrative performance. The only adequate way of assessing whether this was achieved or not would have been by systematic observation of the administrative behaviour of participants in their own schools before and after the course, and this was beyond our capacity. A poor alternative was to seek opinion, and this we did by means of questionnaires at the end of the course.

The summary of participants' reactions that follows includes not only assessments of the value of the in-basket activities and lectures but also of three carefully designed additional learning experiences, which need a brief explanation.

'Observation and Evaluation of Classroom Teaching'

Participants observed a student-teacher at work with a class of primary pupils in a one-way vision observation classroom, evaluated his teaching, compared judgements and considered appropriate strategies for giving guidance to him and to other beginning teachers.

'Exercise in Grouping Pupils for Effective Instruction'

Participants took part in a demanding exercise developed at the Department of Educational Administration of the University of Texas to show the limited extent to which the range of individual differences among a representative sample of 100 pupils is reduced when pupils are grouped according to a variety of criteria. (Harris and McIntyre, 1966)

'Staff Meetings'

Each of the established small groups conducted a staff meeting with one of their members as principal in the observation room. These meetings were observed, discussed and evaluated with the emphasis on various leadership styles.

V. An Analysis of Reactions to the Workshop

Note: 25 of the 30 participants completed questionnaires. Several aspects of the course were rated on a five-point scale, numbers being interpreted as follows:

1	2	3	4	5
VERY POOR NO USE AT ALL	POOR NOT MUCH USE	FAIR FAIRLY USEFUL	GOOD VALUABLE	EXCELLENT VERY VALUABLE

1. **Taken as a whole (and compared with other courses you have attended), how would you rate this workshop?**

Rating	1	2	3	4	5
*No. of responses	—	—	—	4	20

2. **Do you feel that this workshop has given you added insight into school administration?**

	yes	no	not sure
No. of responses	25	—	—

3. **If so, what are the most important insights you have gained?**

The need for involving staff in decision-making and for building up co-operation and commitment was mentioned frequently (11)** Related points were the value of well designed staff meetings (4), the need for effective communication at all levels within the school and with parents (5) and the importance of sound personal relationships (4). Decisions needed to be carefully made and soundly based (2) and flexibility and open mindedness were important (4).

4. **Has this workshop given you added insight into your own attitudes and BEHAVIOUR TOWARDS COLLEAGUES OR PUPILS?**

	yes	no	not sure
No. of responses	23	—	2

5. **If so, what are the most important things you have learned about yourself? (If you would prefer not to answer this question please indicate)**

Several felt that as leaders they tended to be too dogmatic or dictatorial and needed to be more considerate (7). Several were dissatisfied with their decision-making skills and felt they were too hasty or too rigid in their thinking (9). Some saw themselves as shy and inhibited and in need of greater confidence (4). Because they are essentially personal and private most insights cannot be neatly classified. Certain of them may prove to be very important for individual participants, e.g.

"the difficulty I experience in 'confrontation' with staff" (a headmaster)

"my tendency to be too cock-sure of my views: this tends to be offensive to others"

6. **How valuable did you find each of the following aspects of the workshop? (Please explain your rating very briefly wherever possible)**

A Individual work on in-baskets

Rating	1	2	3	4	5
No. of responses	—	—	1	7	17

B Small group discussions

Rating	1	2	3	4	5
No. of responses	—	—	—	7	18

C Plenary sessions

Rating	1	2	3	4	5
No. of responses	—	—	9	11	4

D Lectures

Rating	1	2	3	4	5
No. of responses	—	4	4	10	6

E "Observation and evaluation of classroom teaching"

Rating	1	2	3	4	5
No. of responses	—	5	13	5	2

F "Exercise in grouping pupils for effective instruction"

Rating	1	2	3	4	5
No. of responses	—	4	11	3	6

G "Staff meetings"

Rating	1	2	3	4	5
No. of responses	—	—	—	6	19

H Informal discussion over lunch and tea

Rating	1	2	3	4	5
No. of responses	—	1	6	11	7

* Responses to question 1 and to certain other questions do not add up to 25. Some ratings were omitted; others were ambiguous.

** Figures in brackets indicate the number of participants making a particular point.

7. **Do you think that this workshop will change your behaviour in your own school in any way at all?**

	yes	no	not sure
No. of responses	23	—	1

8. **If so, what actions are you considering taking in your own school as a result of this workshop?**

(Note: The summary of responses to this questions deals with responses of principals and principals designate only. N= 10)

4 Principals were considering changes in their system of streaming (grouping of pupils in classes according to attainment or measured ability), 5 intended making changes in the pattern of staff meetings, 3 intended improving relationships with staff and their own availability, 3 wished to involve staff more fully in planning and innovation, 2 were considering introducing team teaching, 2 wished to take a greater interest in the supervision of classroom teaching and 2 intended to delegate more responsibility to staff.

Other intended actions concerned sex education, involvement of parents, grouping of pupils, punishment, use of prefects, guidance of student teachers, liaison with the Faculty of Education and community responsibility.

9. **What criticisms do you have about the way in which this workshop was organised and presented?**

10. **What practical suggestions can you make for improving future courses in school administration?**

(Note: There was so much overlap in the answers to questions 9 and 10 that these questions are being treated as one)

Participants were generous in their praise of the workshop but made several suggestions for improvements. The time of the workshop was considered unsuitable (4) and evening and term-time courses were suggested. There should be more emphasis on routine office work (3) and on experimentation in and evaluation of teaching methods (4). Plenary sessions should be more firmly structured (3) and there should be more practical exercises making use of the one-way vision screen (2).

11. **Would you be interested in attending a further course in school administration?** (Explain areas of interest)

	yes	no	not sure
No. of Responses	24	0	1

Areas of interest included the following: new teaching methods (6), routine office administration (4), group dynamics and group methods (3), examinations (2), remedial teaching and problems of slow-learners (2), the role of the vice-principal (2), administration theory (1), evaluation and guidance of students and teachers (1), punishment (1), promotion (1), competition (1), and timetables (1).

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Similar reactions to the use of simulation in in-service courses for educational administrators have been reported in Scotland (Millar, 1967), and the knowledge that this approach is usually found stimulating and realistic, and that participants at least affirm changes in ideas, attitudes and self-perceptons seems reason enough to design a range of simulated schools each, like Liesbeek Primary, in an authentic social context. However, ignorance about the nature, degree and duration of change through such workshop experiences as perceived within real school situations means that such innovation in in-service education needs to be planned within the framework of systematic research programmes.

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