

# *Administrators Learn Democratic Behavior*

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Through working closely together in a group situation, several school administrators and teachers come to a deeper appreciation of democratic behavior.

**C**AN SCHOOL administrators learn to function more democratically in group situations? An experiment was initiated at the University of Maryland in 1948 to find an answer to this question.

Its plan was as follows. A group of school administrators was organized as a graduate class to learn how to work more effectively in group situations. Each of these administrators was working in a group in his own school situation in the field, and each was to use this group as a field laboratory.

The class was called a "Practicum in Personnel Relationships." The practicum, it was hoped, would be a valuable supplement to the internship program which had been organized a half-year earlier. The internship program, thus, would help prospective administrators acquire competence in accord with sound current practice; and the practicum would help practicing and prospective administrators acquire behavior which, in terms of democratic concepts, would be more advanced than that now generally put into practice.

Teachers were included in the program because basic democratic concepts seemed to imply that administrators and teachers wanting to learn to act

more democratically should seek to learn together.

As the practicum has developed, a group of practicing teachers and administrators, limited to fifteen in number, is organized as a graduate class which all fifteen students take throughout the entire school year (September to June). Each student in the practicum is working with some problem-centered group in the field, usually in formulating some aspect of educational policy. A person enrolling in the practicum might be: a principal, superintendent or college president working with a school faculty; a principal or superintendent working with a parents' advisory council; a teacher working with classroom parents on a philosophy of teaching for his classroom; an adviser working with a student council or club; or some other educational or social worker with special responsibilities in at least one group.

## **Group Records**

Each member in the practicum keeps careful records on his group in the field. These records provide materials which can be used as a basis for discussion, and a code of ethics is adopted to help assure that the meetings of the practicum will be kept confidential.

The early meetings of the group are typically devoted to a discussion of the keeping of records on the groups in the field. The keeping of records requires the development of a high degree of skill, both in observation and recording. The students need to learn to record information which is significant in terms of: the work of the group and the atmosphere in which it works; the problems faced by the student in working with the group; the members of the group as individuals; evaluation of the group's work and the help given by the student; administrative and supervisory needs; and needs relating to research. The students must learn also to include objective information and to differentiate this from subjective evaluations reflecting the feelings of the recorder.

### **Practice and Theory**

As the group learns how to keep records, an attempt is made to draw upon theory related to group situations in the field. Theory becomes meaningful as it helps to develop an understanding of actual problems, and a conscious effort is made continuously to emphasize the relationships between our own individual situations and the corresponding theory. When one of the records deals with a specific point, such as, for example, the planning of staff meetings, we discuss the theory relating to that point. The purpose of such discussions is to help to deepen understandings, not to work out suggestions for a specific situation. Help for specific situations comes primarily through deepened understanding, and to some extent also through the group therapy which is an incidental result of the group's work.

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When the reading of a record raises a specific question (e.g., a question concerning how staff meetings should be planned), growing out of the operation of one of the groups in the field, the immediate discussion draws only upon the experience of the class members and does not utilize the related literature of the field. Hence, the various questions are listed as they are brought up in the discussions. These questions are then organized as a basis for later discussions. The group can prepare for such discussions through readings drawn from the bibliographies in the "Syllabus" or from other appropriate sources. The relationship between practice and theory thus becomes specific and clear: (a) the problems discussed are practical problems growing out of the records on the groups with which the individual students are working in the field; (b) these problems are first discussed by the group on the basis of the experience of the individual students without the benefit of the related literature; and (c) the problems are subsequently discussed again after the group members have had an opportunity to read relevant materials.

### **Procedures in Working Together**

Controls in the practicum are vested in the group itself. As a result, the procedure each year is unique. At an early date, the group typically authorizes the establishment of a planning committee, the membership of which rotates so that each person takes his turn on the

committee. The professor is *ex officio* a member of this planning committee. Early in the year also, the group typically authorizes a rotation system whereby every member at one time or another becomes chairman, recorder or perhaps observer.

The planning committee meets after each class period to implement general plans for the future activities of the group which have been decided upon by the entire practicum. Sometimes the plans can be implemented by drawing on the "Syllabus," a guide carefully prepared prior to the course to include suggested questions and readings organized by topics. Although it is a rare event when the committee takes suggestions in toto from the "Syllabus," these organized materials are often useful as a resource. After each meeting of the planning committee, every member of the practicum receives through the mail: (a) the minutes of the last meeting of the practicum; and (b) a detailed statement outlining future plans. Such plans may be changed or vetoed at any time by the entire practicum group.

The planning committee (including the professor) works hard after each meeting of the class. After the committee has formulated a specific plan, the student who is to be chairman and the professor may work for many hours in order that the committee plan for the next meeting will be successfully executed. Careful planning is considered essential even though, and perhaps because, a discussion may lead in any one of a number of different ways.

### **Group Evaluation**

The group learns to evaluate itself critically in terms of the purposes it

hopes to achieve. The purposes are worked out by the group as a whole, and under each are listed various questions to throw light on whether the purpose is being realized. These purposes and related questions help to guide and stimulate the evaluations. At first, the evaluations are begun by an observer, whose observations are followed by discussion on the part of the entire group. Later in the year, the group becomes highly critical of its own actions and a special observer is no longer necessary.

The self-evaluation of the group is helped by a record of group activities. One member of the practicum keeps as his field-group record, a record (different from the minutes) on the practicum group itself. This written record provides objective data as a basis for evaluation. (Tape recordings have been used also, but so far have not been used as successfully as one might expect.)

Special meetings are set aside for the sole purpose of evaluation in order to strengthen the evaluation which occurs at the individual meetings. This last year, for example, three consecutive two-hour sessions at the end of the first semester were devoted to evaluation, and in each case, the meetings lasted well beyond the scheduled two-hour period. In advance of these meetings, the record of the practicum activities had been carefully studied. It was thus possible during the evaluation to have readily available for each purpose and question the factual data pertaining to it. After the record pertaining to a specific question had been read, the group discussed and interpreted the information as a means of evaluating its activities. This year, within the first six weeks, the group decided to devote an entire

two-hour session to its own evaluation.

In addition to this periodic session, evaluation is an important part of every meeting. The group learns to become increasingly critical as it asks itself several questions: Was our plan for this meeting a good plan? Did we utilize the plan effectively? To what extent did we achieve the purposes we had set for this meeting? How could we have planned and worked more effectively? Is our long-range plan satisfactory?

### Individual Evaluation

Individual evaluation is stimulated by the evaluation sessions of the group. During the evaluation sessions, individual students ask questions such as: Am I getting what I expected out of this course? Am I learning verbalizations only, or am I actually learning *how to act* more democratically in a group? How can I apply to my job what I am learning here? What are some lines of direction which I want to pursue in terms of my long-range professional development? In addition, much individual evaluation takes place in the planning committee and in small spontaneous groups of two or three individuals. Students are often heard to make comments such as: "I have to learn not to talk so much"; "I think I've learned a lot about how to conduct a meeting in such manner that a group can make real progress in accomplishing its purposes"; "I am gradually

learning how different, autocratic and democratic leadership are in actual practice"; "I am using some of the techniques we learned here in working with the faculty in our school." We try to learn to appraise the class in terms of growth—growth on the part of the group, and on the part of each one of us—and our emphasis is primarily upon how we can learn to improve our own behavior.

### Results

In such a group situation there are many ups and downs. After the individuals have learned to know each other well, to feel that the group really belongs to them, and have learned to use evaluation effectively as a basis for planning, group morale is very high.

As time passes, all of us in the practicum change. We learn to become sensitive to and to understand more completely the subtle undercurrents of feeling. We learn to know ourselves and to understand how we create problems for others. We become more understanding and more skillful in helping others with their problems. We develop competence in working within a group.

The need for school administrators with understanding and skill in the area of human relationships is critical. It is believed that such a practicum, while not the only solution, is one means which can be effective in meeting this need.

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