

# How Sound Are the Assumptions of Competency-Based Programs?

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**P**ROponents of competency-based programs are currently being accorded time and attention at a level and degree usually associated with seminal developments in the field of education. Faced with what they perceive as the demand for "accountability," many educators are embracing the notion of competency-based programs as a prescriptive and effective solution.

For the most part, however, advocates of these programs accept, rather than challenge, certain assumptions regarding the conduct of education which I believe are demonstrably false. Therefore, this article focuses on the assumptions, rather than the how-to-do-it aspects, of competency-based programs.

The present trend toward competency-based programs does not represent a dramatic departure from past experience. For instance, the competency-pattern model of the Southern States Cooperative Program in

Educational Administration (SSCPEA) developed in the early 1950's had the following three dimensions, according to Graff and Street:

1. Job analysis and identification of critical tasks
2. Categorization of tasks and identification of knowledge and skills to perform in each category
3. Theory definition, to provide the "cognitive maps" needed to understand the tasks and selection of appropriate procedures and courses of action for their completion.<sup>1</sup>

There have been many changes in the field since the work of SSCPEA. McCleary<sup>2</sup> points to the development of general systems theory that permits more precision—and possibly more rigor—in the development of competency-based programs than was possible in earlier efforts. The usefulness of the

<sup>1</sup> Orin B. Graff and Calvin Street. *Improving Competence in Educational Administration*. New York: Harper Brothers, 1956.

<sup>2</sup> Lloyd E. McCleary. "Competency Based Educational Administration and Applications to Related Fields." Mimeographed paper, January 1973.

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system model as a basis for operational and organizational analyses has been well documented, and currently one finds numerous examples of linear system models used in discussions of competency-based programs.

As early as 1960, Amitai Etzioni noted the differences in analyses based on system models rather than goal models: "The starting point for [the system model] is not the goal itself but a *working model of a social unit which is capable of achieving a goal.*"<sup>3</sup>

Central to the development of competency-based programs, therefore, is the adequate conceptualization of the system model and the social unit to which the model is being applied; of equal importance is the relative meaning of the model and the unit.

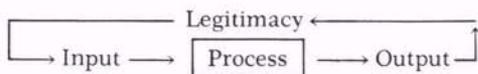
### Legitimacy Is Crucial

Traditionally, the system model has been thought of as a linear model, represented as:



In effect, one starts with raw materials (input), performs some operations on those materials (process) by which they are transformed from the original state into some new material or product (output) which is exported into the environment. This deceptively clear-cut model, however, omits a vital component. On the basis of open system theory, the vitality of an organization depends upon information flow and environmental intrusion, rather than on energy flow as is the case with closed systems.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, the linear model must be extended into a loop model,<sup>5</sup> represented as:



As indicated in the loop system model, outputs are not disassociated from inputs, but become the basis for the acquisition of additional inputs. This added dimension—legitimation—is the active process of neutralizing environmental constraints and mobilizing environmental resources for the attainment of organizational goals. Legitimation, thus, comprises the set of activities in which the organization must engage in order to acquire needed inputs and to perform the process whereby inputs are transformed into outputs.

The concept of legitimacy is decidedly different from the idea of accountability. Legitimacy embraces the notion of institutional responsiveness, and the authentic involvement<sup>6</sup> of members and clients, that is, teachers, students, parents, and the general public, in the pursuit of organizational goals. On the other hand, the concept of accountability seems to be concerned with the institutionalization of finite mathematical formulae for convincing these same groups that we are doing a good job.

In the context of programs for training educational administrators and in the context of the loop system model, the inputs are the funds acquired from student fees, state and federal allocations, and—perhaps most important—the students themselves. All of these inputs are processed in one way or another, resulting in the transformation of the student (for example, a self-directed teacher wishing to become a principal, or a principal wishing to become a superintendent) into some kind of output (or finished product) who will assume an administrative position in the schools. The output becomes the focus of legitimation and the acquisition of additional raw materials. Given the added dimension of legitimacy, it seems clear that we will have to build a sense of program

<sup>3</sup> Amitai Etzioni, "Two Approaches to Organizational Analysis: A Critique and a Suggestion," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, September 1960, pp. 257-78.

<sup>4</sup> For further exploration of this notion, see: Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn, "Open-Systems Theory," in: *The Social Psychology of Organizations*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966.

<sup>5</sup> The author is indebted to Dr. Edward Gross, Professor of Sociology, University of Washington, for first introducing him to this concept.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed and searching explication of the concept of authenticity, see: Amitai Etzioni, *The Active Society*, New York: The Free Press, 1968, Chapter 21, pp. 617-66.

worth in order to avoid entropy and, in the end, extinction.

The portion of the model which has been altered because of demands for competency-based programs is the *process* phase. Proponents of these programs seemingly operate from the viewpoint that a change in the process will somehow improve the product, that is, improve the program and axiomatically produce better administrators. It would seem, then, according to the proponents, that all that is left to be done is to "get on with the task." This notion is evident from the McCleary comment that in order to avoid the external press for accountability, we need "in a rational way to construct some methodologies that provide the means to (a) define competency, (b) establish identifiable instructional modes, and (c) provide measures of performance that can be related to the definitions of competency and the instructional system used."<sup>7</sup>

### Intervention Can Change Output

The notion that *process* is the primary determinant of output is demonstrably false. In the system model, interventions which have a potential for changing the output can occur at both the input and the process stages. There is considerable research evidence, which was further maintained by Clark,<sup>8</sup> to support the notion that in the system model, one can vary the output by varying both the input and the process. In addition, varying the input seems to interact with the process in such a way as to further affect the output.

Apparently, then, there are two ways to "get on with the task." One way is to assume that inputs are adequate and the problem is merely to find the best process to achieve the desired output. Another way is to change

the focus to a critical examination of the inputs, particularly the student inputs.

In considering this focus, the author carefully studied (a) the relationship between commonly used criteria for selection of persons to enter programs in educational administration, and (b) the predecisional behavior styles of administrative trainees in simulated problem situations. It was concluded that further study of other variables seemed warranted, as only 59 percent of the variance in the dependent variable—predecisional behavior styles—was predicted from the selection criteria. It was also concluded that "one notion is rather clear, however: a fail-safe way of increasing quality output is merely to increase quality input (selection) and hope that functional processes (training) at least do not have a negative effect."<sup>9</sup>

Thus, a logical way to "get on with the task" is to maintain the process as is and vary the input, that is, select different kinds of persons to pursue administrative training. We thus must focus on the selection criteria and the selection process, and uncomfortable questions must be raised: Do we, for one reason or another, select *out* those who are deeply concerned about making schools more responsive to those affected by the schools? Do we select *in* those who are unconcerned about responsiveness but are preoccupied with the development of formulae for the maintenance of order and control?

I submit that if we continue on an exclusive path limited to changing the process to, for instance, competency-based programs, without examining the input question first, then we will content ourselves with changing the process for the wrong product. To do so will place us in the position of being increasingly—and justifiably—vulnerable to those who charge us with trivial thinking. Should we not cease chasing self-serving finite prescriptions and seize the opportunity to seek larger solutions? □

<sup>9</sup> Richard L. Andrews. "Utilization of Selection Criteria for Screening Applicants for Administrative Training for the Prediction of Patterns of Predecisional Behavior at the End of the Training Period." Paper presented to the American Educational Research Association, February 1970.

<sup>7</sup> Lloyd E. McCleary. "Observations on Competency Based Curriculum Progress." *CCBC Notebook: The Competency Based Curriculum* 2 (4): 1-3; July 1973.

<sup>8</sup> Richard W. Clark. "Group Composition Effects on Participants' Attitudes and Decisions in Simulated Problem Situations." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Washington, 1970.

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