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THE NEW ZEALAND INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIP: AN INTERACTION ANALYSIS USING TALCOTT PARSONS' THEORY OF SOCIAL ACTION

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Education at Massey University

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A B S T R A C T

This study attempted an intensive interaction analysis of two New Zealand intermediate school principals, using Talcott Parsons' theory of social action as the framework. Parsons believes that within all social systems each functional problem dealt with has one and only one appropriate set of pattern variables that lead to system stability. This prescribed relationship was tested and subject to a number of limitations, was found to be well supported. Through this testing, data of a survey nature was compiled as to who with and about what the principals interacted. This data indicated that principals have a number of similar interaction patterns, but also maintain a high degree of individuality. Various factors within their schools, communities, and themselves were found to affect their interaction patterns. Through this application of Parsons' theory to a school setting, some worthwhile insights into the school's organisation and structure were obtained.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM/THESIS

Background of Thesis

The purpose of this study was to learn more about the role and behaviour of the New Zealand intermediate school principal. It was hoped that through an intensive observational analysis of a number of such principals it would be possible to make some generalised statements about the nature of the role and their performance.

Of early interest was the question of a research method. It was noted that some studies in schools simply collect raw data without basing their collection on a theoretical frame of reference, believing thereby to minimise researcher bias and to allow the data to create their own categories for analysis. This study was not interested in developing a new framework for educational research, but wanted to attempt an application of an existing theory, thereby testing that theory and in the process gaining additional insights into the principal's position.

With that in mind, the search for a theoretical framework was based on the following considerations. The researcher had to find a model which would handle the complexity of a modern school; which would explain the structures and processes of the organisation as well as the behaviour of the actors; and which would apply equally well to other social institutions.

By reviewing the literature on organisational theory, it was found that the study of schools as organisations had, in the past, suffered from the same problem as had the study of organisations in general. Hills (1968) when commenting on the general study of organisations and Bidwell (1965) when commenting on the organisational study of schools agreed that, at least by that time, little systematic organisational study had been accomplished. Tyler (1973) pointed up numerous studies of schools that were said to be of an organisational nature, but suggested that some tended to be dominated by administrative issues, others completely ignored the element of structure in schools, and still others relied on teachers' perceptions of their organisational environment for their data.

Corwin (1967) pointed out two reasons for the past lack of study of complex educational organisations: an over-emphasis of the teaching function itself and an undying concern with the values that schools teach. Tyler (1973) added that although the school's organisational patterns were influencial, they were not as easily apprehended or studied as, for example, the school's physical layout or the principal's personality.

As a result of the above lack of research, educationalists have had to rely on empirical work usually narrow in focus which was directed at some process or activity in the school and which lacked a conceptual framework that was sufficient to coordinate their efforts. This fragmentation and discontinuity of past research pointed up the need for some unifying, systematic, and coherent frame of reference in order to coordinate existing research and to act as a guide for further research in schools.

Lane, Corwin, and Monahan (1968) suggested one approach to a more systematic view of educational organisations, one in which administrators "must be cognitively capable of conceiving the organisation as a total entity" (p.335). These authors believed that Talcott Parsons' theory of social action, when used as a model for the above purpose, was useful and appropriate for the study of schools as organisations.

Parsons, although well into the construction of his theory by 1937, did not turn to the study of complex organisations until 1956, when he used them as a testing ground for his general theory. Since then, he has published a number of works on organisational theory, but as yet had not extensively or systematically applied his general theory to the study of complex organisations.

This in itself turned out to be the main reason why Parsons' theory was selected as the framework for this research. Williams pointed out in 1961 a lack of empirical research testing Parsons' theory. He contended that thus far Parsons' theory had only been applied piece-meal to interpret data, to develop hypotheses, and to descriptively order information. By the 1950's, a few observational and experimental studies had begun to test the usefulness of his theory in a variety of fields, but even fewer attempted to do so in the field of education. Although Ashley, Cohan, and Slatter (1969) and Hills (1968) theoretically applied the Parsonian framework to education, the only experimental study that Lane et al. (1968) found was that of Curtis (1965) and he

only applied parts of the theory. This lack of empirical application of the Parsonian framework in the school setting convinced this study that the testing of its application had to take preference over the original hopes of providing more generalised conclusions as to the position of the principal.

Certainly, the lack of empirical testing of the theory was not in itself sufficient grounds to have selected it for this research purpose. It was found to more than fulfil the other considerations outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Parsons' theory was found to be not only a complete, general theoretical system able to jump disciplinary boarders, but also to provide a comprehensiveness that few other theories could have boasted of.

Statement of Problem/Thesis

The focus of this study was on the position of the New Zealand intermediate school principal, how and with whom he spent his school-related time. Parsons' theory of social action was used as the general framework, but due to the lack of empirical research based on this theory, especially Parsons' linkage between his schemes, it was decided that the primary emphasis of this study should be shifted from attempting generalised conclusions about the principal to a critical analysis of the application of Parsons' theory in both general and school settings.

For this reason, only a limited number of schools and their principals were studied in order to provide a more intensive analysis. Although realising that by limiting the number of situations any generalised conclusions about the position of the principal could not be considered as representative of all principals, it was felt that tentative conclusions could still be put forth in order to lead the way for others doing more generalised and comprehensive research.

It was hoped that this study would provide tentative conclusions in three areas; firstly, generalised descriptions of the principal's position through the people he interacted with and the problems he dealt with; secondly, an initial testing of Parsons' linkage between his schemes; and thirdly, through the insights gained in attempting the above, a critical analysis of Parsons' theory as applied to both general and school settings.

To accomplish this, two schools were chosen where intensive interaction observation analysis of the principals was carried out. During the research periods, each principal was "shadowed" by the researcher recording all of his interactions on a portable tape recorder for later analysis. In addition, back-up interviews were also recorded to fill-in any data gaps, to provide additional cases for study, and to check for errors in the observational data.

By classifying every interaction recorded as to who was involved and what problems were discussed, data of a generalised survey nature were compiled which later led to the formulation of a number of tentative generalised conclusions about the position of the principal. As mentioned above, these conclusions were not presented as representative of all principals, but as a guide for subsequent more generalised and comprehensive research.

In order to test Parsons' linkage between his schemes, to be explained in the next chapter, a sample of the interactions at each school were chosen for analysis in three ways; firstly, each was classified as a type of functional problem according to Parsons' functional problem scheme; secondly,the orientations of principal involved in each interaction were classified according to Parsons' pattern variable scheme; and lastly, the probability of each interaction having led to either functional or dysfunctional relationships was assessed. Again, the limited sample used in this testing disallowed the possibility that the conclusion offered could be considered as representative, but it was felt that this initial testing required such intensive analysis that the sample had to be kept very limited. The conclusion offered therefore could not be considered as representative, but only as a guide for further research.

Lastly, in order to critically analyse the application of Parsons' theory, all the limitations, problems, and difficulties encountered in the above application were organised and discussed in two categories, general applicational difficulties and more specific school-related difficulties.

Review of Organisation

Chapter 1 introduced the problem and the thesis. Chapter 2 was concerned with the theoretical concepts of Parsons' theory of social action. Chapter 3 applied one of the theoretical schemes to the educational setting, specifically to New Zealand

intermediate schools. Chapter 4 described the general methodological procedures employed in the research model considered appropriate for this investigation. Chapter 5 presented and analysed the findings. Chapter 6 drew conclusions from the analysed data and critically analysed Parsons' theory as applied to both general and school settings.