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LANGUAGE POLITICS IN THE WORKPLACE:
NEEDS AND APPROACHES IN BLACK
SCHOOL-LEAVER TRAINING

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Language Politics in the Workplace: Needs and Approaches in Black School-leaver Training

1.0 Introduction

The most recent report on the activities of United States firms in South Africa who are signatories to the Sullivan principles[1] reveals once again that black advancement in South African industry is not prospering as it should. The most usual explanation advanced for this enduring problem is the quality of black education, or "Bantu education," as it has come to be called by its critics. Certainly the quality of the segregated educational systems for blacks must take a substantial share of the blame.

Discrimination against blacks in industry is another major factor. Once a barely concealed norm among white employees in industry and commerce, discrimination against black colleagues has gradually become less and less respectable. Instead of becoming weakened, however, it now appears in more subtle and artfully rationalised forms, and is consequently less easily counter-acted by top management, which is generally committed to black advancement[2].

While fully accepting the salience of both these major factors, they are not in themselves a sufficient explanation. Separately or in combination, they are not sufficiently pervasive or powerful to prevent exceptional individuals pushing their way through the web of constraints. Given the huge numbers of blacks in industry and commerce, one would expect many more exceptions to prove the rule, as it were.

The absence of a significantly accumulating number of exceptions - blacks occupying a few but very noticeable number of key jobs in industry and commerce with competence and distinction - is rapidly leading to a second generation of stereotypes of Blacks. Black managers and executives are almost solely in specialised positions

which require an ethnic identity, such as roles in personnel, labour relations or sales divisions serving the black market. Such "black" advancement as does occur in the more central functions like finance, production and administration is almost always limited to Asians and coloureds.

The absence of an accumulating number of deviations from the prevailing pattern means that stereotypes held of Africans are not challenged. The expectation that blacks will not prove capable of advancing is not contradicted and, sadly, perceptions of black capabilities at higher levels of responsibility is much what it was ten years ago or more.

Thus there must be powerful additional factors at work in keeping the racial hierarchies in industry and commerce intact. It is suggested that one of these is social segregation outside of the workplace, and in positing this it is also implied that social institutions in society are highly interdependent and interactive. It is extremely difficult to establish given relational patterns in a society's economic institutions if there are no similar patterns in the non-economic institutions, or vice versa.

More specifically, what is argued is that black job entrants in industry and commerce have had no opportunity whatsoever to learn or absorb symbols, skills and understandings required for successful adaptation in the white-controlled economic institutions. A black school-leaver, for example, has been born in a segregated black residential area, taught by schoolteachers with little or no exposure to anything other than the black social world, learns as a second language a form of English which is a highly established and consistent variant of standard South African English, and develops conversational and interactional skills, and responses appropriate to what is in effect a highly insular social system. Blacks entering white-controlled institutions therefore enter as foreigners. They may as well be, say, Polish or Portuguese immigrants, but with two major differences. Unlike middle-class immigrants, they have had no ongoing

contact with the kind of people who run and control a modern society. They are also not accorded the social concessions made to foreigners, because they are supposed to be South Africans.

In blue collar and technical positions the problem of adaptation is often not as serious, simply because the jobs involved have very specific and easily defined requirements for which established training or induction procedures exist. In white-collar positions, however, with their greater emphasis on varied administrative, organisational and social skills, the adaptation required is a crossing from one subculture to another, but without it being recognised as it would be for a true foreigner.

The task of the new black job entrant in crossing into another culture is not primarily a problem of "traditional" versus "modern" culture. The problem is the subculture perpetuated by the high degree of formal and informal social segregation in South African society.

This feature of the adaptation problems of blacks in white-collar positions in industry is exacerbated by a number of associated factors. Firstly, by common recognition in white society, the black subculture is inferior. Hence the black job-entrant has a stigma which is more than skin colour. This means that he or she must have a problem with self-confidence, and consequently a relatively greater need for reassurance and social support.

Secondly, the lack of confidence goes along with self-consciousness. Black recruits to 'white' offices are wrapped up in themselves in the new situation. This impairs listening skills, makes them unspontaneous and also makes them insensitive to the needs of others with whom they wish to communicate.

Thirdly, the lack of an appropriate repertoire of interactional skills makes the black person feel powerless, as a consequence of which passivity and social 'retreat' are unavoidable responses.

Fourthly, the partially enforced nature of social segregation and black responses to it create among blacks a very deep ambivalence about the worthiness of white institutions, which in turn undermines their motivation[3].

Fifthly, it cannot be forgotten that there is only a very tiny black middle class. Recruits into white-collar positions in commerce and industry are in the main from working class or peasant backgrounds. Problems of adjustment during "status mobility" would arise even if the recruits were not black.

Lastly, since blacks as a collectivity in South Africa are subservient, it requires extra-ordinary social skill and conviction for a black office-employee to confront a white colleague or colleagues on issues relevant to work and office interaction. Since a substantial part of any organisational interaction is controlled conflict, blacks suffer enormous disadvantages in dealing adequately with its requirements in day-to-day interaction.

These and often similar factors combine with the effects of poor quality education, second language problems and subtle discrimination to form a veritable blanket of impediments through which even exceptionally able black employees cannot penetrate. As blacks fail to adjust adequately for these reasons, stereotypes about them become more and more powerful and the process becomes self-reinforcing.

An oversimple answer to these problems would be to suggest that social segregation, including school segregation, should be dismantled. Obviously it should be, but with the political institutions of white socio-political hegemony so firmly in place it is not likely to happen in the short to medium turn. In the meantime black employees are deprived of experience in higher-level administration which they will need when political change does occur.

Therefore it seems essential that the pattern in black employment be broken soon. The economic need for more technically-skilled manpower is changing the pattern in blue collar and technical work; new progress and precedents are required in the white collar and administrative fields.

The need for symbols of blacks advancement at high level is ensuring that a few token managerial appointments will continue to be made. These incumbents, however, suffer the additional disadvantage that they are more noticeable, more vulnerable and less experienced than they would be if they could operate with the underpinnings of growing numbers of successful blacks in clerical and lower level administrative positions. The crucial need, therefore, seems to be for programmes to assist the process of successful black clerical and administrative employment. This type of employment is traditionally open to non-university-trained school-leavers. Therefore the black matriculant seems to be the most profitable target group for supportive programmes.

2.0   The Programme

While the broad problems impeding black success in white collar employment can be identified, the specific insights required to mount programmes of support required systematic research, observation and experimentation. To this end the present project was launched. Its aim was to provide a research basis for the development and evaluation of a programme to facilitate black progress in clerical and administrative employment. Full details of the research programme cannot be provided within the scope of this paper. Certain major

findings will be given, but the present analysis emphasizes the overall conceptualisation of the project rather than the detailed empirical results. This paper also broadly outlines how the research insights culminated in the design of a Work Orientation and Language Programme[4] which aims at preparing black school-leavers for adaptation to typical demands in a 'white' work environment.

Development of competence in the dominant language, which in the Durban region is English, was regarded as one of the strongest facilitators of adjustment to a workplace which might, for a variety of reasons, be alien to the black school-leaver. Our research soon revealed, though, that the <u>underpinnings</u> of what constitutes this competence for a black in the South African context are far more complex than what may usually be expected with adults learning a second language.

2.1 Research

A variety of specific research ventures were undertaken with the emphasis at first on attitude surveys. This was followed by a 3-week participant observation study and two larger scale quantitative studies. The value of the research was in the cumulative effects of all the ventures rather than on results derived from each instrument in isolation. The results, and interpretations thereof, were also verified and extended during the running of two programmes and in follow-up discussions with trainees who obtained employment.

A synthesis of the needs of black school-leavers as perceived by different interest groups, and as interpreted by the researcher, can briefly be sketched as follows:

2.1.1 Views of Management and Supervisory Staff

From an employer's perspective, needs identified and explanations offered are presumably based on generalisations which stem from job-situated experience. Although black advancement programmes have resulted in an increased focus on the achievement and advancement of black employees, it is very often a focus on management-level blacks and not on those in junior white collar positions. Furthermore, as was alluded to earlier, black advancement and affirmative action programmes incorporate all blacks, and in reality it is often Asians and coloureds who are employed and advanced and not Africans. In the Durban region, for example, there are still very few African employees in junior white collar positions.

Management's justification for this imbalance is at least two-fold:

(1) Africans lack a trainable base on which to build further training due to their poor and inappropriate educational background. The effects are specifically manifested in the 'hard skills' areas of job performance.

(2) African culture still carries a traditional orientation which is ill-suited to a western, industrial work setting.

The effects of these two areas of skill and attitude deficits are perceived to be

- poor language skills
- lack of achievement-orientation
- strong affiliation needs
- little understanding of the western industrial work ethic (for example, punctuality, initiative, responsibility), and
- poorly informed aspirations and expectations.

Eric Mafuna (1981)[5], president of the Black Management Forum, summarized the image employers have of the black newcomer to industry in a talk given to managers:

> "Their major problem is that they are not readily employable ..... (T)hey do not know how to conduct interviews; their expectations are screwed up; they can hardly make themselves understood in the language of business .... and most of all they have totally wrong attitudes and expectations towards business...."

What this rather gloomy picture seems to suggest is that some form of behaviour and attitude change or adaptation is required if the black school-leaver is to be accepted in the world of white dominated work.

2.1.2   Perceptions   of School-leavers

Research among black school-leavers themselves[6] revealed that, in general, they know what is required of them in a work environment that is dominated by western industrial values. This knowledge is, however, not demonstrated in work-related behaviour.   Two possibilities exist in this regard.   Firstly, they may simply be articulating norms they have become aware of without internalising them.   The other possibility is that they do not have the social power, confidence or opportunity necessary to implement this knowledge.

The research also revealed, however, that the one outstanding exception to blacks' understanding of what is required at work relates to the importance of dealing with conflict. Indeed, it might well be suggested that it is this aversion to conflict - an aversion which is perhaps partly derived from a legacy of enforced deferential behaviour - that contributes to employers' views of blacks as having serious basic skills deficits. Instead of venturing to demonstrate their ability and equality, blacks may prefer to hide behind a 'deficit facade' and pretend inferiority in order to avoid the risk of crisis and conflict with an objectively more powerful group.

The notion of 'skills deficit' may therefore have become another imprecise and unhelpful blanket statement to explain blacks' inability to compete effectively in a job context where they feel vulnerable and poorly accepted.

2.1.3 Perceptions of the Workplace

In a large scale quantitative study[7] perceptions new employees have of others in the workplace were explored. This was an attempt to identify more closely factors which may affect behaviour and interaction at work. Although it was not possible to come much closer to either refuting or supporting initial notions regarding variables affecting behaviour, insights were derived about perceptions both white and black new employees have of personality traits or qualities necessary for positive interaction in the workplace. For example, in identifying 'significant others' in the workplace (i.e. those who affect, in any manner, the way new employees feel and behave at work), the black sample gave high salience to social supportiveness as a key quality facilitating interaction with others. The white and Asian sample, on the other hand, emphasized 'competence at work', 'social integration', and 'accommodation of others'.

At first glance this seems to support the notion often mentioned in the literature on black advancement that blacks fail to demonstrate an achievement orientation due to their strong affiliation needs[8]. It is worth mentioning here that achievement motivation training is highly regarded in employee training. Yet, a closer analysis of the perceptions new employees have of the workplace shows there appears to be an alternate explanation. For example, our participant observation study[9] established that all new employees of any race rely heavily on social support (i.e. they have strong affiliation needs) in their adaptation to a new work environment. A strategy used successfully in securing support seems to be the forming of close friendships and peer relations with individuals who are socially similar and who have already been accepted by the work group.

For blacks this form of social support is lacking. They seem to be unsuccessful in developing a meaningful network of support within the group simply because of the lack of numbers of blacks already integrated into work groups, and because they seem to be unable to establish a clear personal, social or cultural identity for themselves in the workplace. In fact, the lack of much needed social support produces anxieties which exacerbate problems in the perception of the workplace. This is further complicated by the lack of social and work related skills. If blacks are not competent at work, they are further hindered in becoming socially integrated and in establishing a position where they do the 'accommodating'.

2.1.4 A Synthesis of Research Findings

The investigations already referred to point to a situation where blacks enter the workplace with very rudimentary notions of how to compete on the one hand, and of how to develop a meaningful network of support on the other. The historical development of race relations in South Africa and the present political and employment structure further complicate the situation where two groups which are ostensiably foreign to each other, meet and have to work together. Both white and black have for so long accepted a premise of there being 'dominant' and 'subordinate' groups that blacks are hardly ever evaluated in terms of themselves and what they have to offer.

Blacks also do not 'negotiate' a more meaningful position for themselves in terms of their needs and abilities. They have to a large extent become victims of a situation where they do not cope because they are not expected to.

This double-bind is characterised by stereotypical behavioural patterns and meaning structures which are imposed on interaction and on the mutual evaluation of this interaction. From among a myriad of subtle and elusive problems it seems appropriate to single out the process of interaction in the work situation as the most salient factor in determining adjustment to and progress in the workplace by black school leavers.

The major focus of the Work Orientation and Language Programme was therefore on the <u>interactive process</u>, a brief outline of the course is presented below. It is important to point out that the interactive process does not depend primarily on linguistic competence, but on the the way in which individuals can use whatever linguistic abilities they have in English to cope with interactive requirements in the workplace.

3.0 <u>The Work Orientation and Language Programme</u>

The courses offered in the 3-month Orientation Programme are
- Language and Communication
- Work Orientation and 'Cultural' Understanding
- Clerical skills and office procedure
- Critical and creative thinking
- Group process and personal development

The <u>aims</u> of the programme are to enable black school-leavers to develop an understanding of the demands of the workplace; and to develop skills and strategies which will facilitate their adaptation.

The <u>more specific objectives</u> of the programme are:
1) To develop specific practical skills which are marketable in the clerical/administrative field;
2) To develop skills and strategies which will develop language competence and facilitate the use of this competence to best effect in interaction;
3) To develop a positive self-concept and thereby increased self-reliance;
4) To develop both co-operative skills for group participation and skills for individual decision-making and responsibility.

The above objectives are pursued in the training by means of <u>an experience based learning model</u> which aims at the development of
(a) a reflective and analytic approach to working life;
(b) an active learning approach; and
(c) personal responsibility for behaviour.

Although the details of a programme which deals adequately with the many-faceted nature of the adaption process could not be decided upon in advance, there were nevertheless clear-cut pointers as to what should be included in training aimed at black school-leavers, and what the learning/teaching approach should be.

It should perhaps be mentioned that value neutrality is very difficult to achieve in any form of training of blacks in the South African context, and that there are a number of alternative approaches as regards

- the content of training
- who should do the training
- who should be the target group, and
- where training should take place.

In each of these choices there is a danger of training deteriorating into little more than the securing of compliance and conformity to narrowly-based dominant white expectations. We also realize that intervention is often regarded as an implicit or explicit admission of the supremacy of western industrial thought and action.

Without entering the debate here, it is necessary to point out that the training team believed that training should not negate what blacks have to offer, but should provide them with functional competence which will enable them to 'negotiate' a more meaningful position at work. In this regard the primary emphasis should be on increasing their behavioural repertoires, rather than replacing one set of behaviour with another.

Basically, what is being suggested is that black school-leavers need to develop specific strategies or ploys helpful in:

- coping at work in the initial stages
- breaking down negative stereotypes, and
- having sufficient understanding of the process of interaction to be able to anticipate problems, to withhold responses in order to achieve strategic ends if necessary, and perhaps even to adapt responses so as to manipulate supervisors and the work environment.

Furthermore, an orientation programme is by its nature of relatively short duration. What this means is that it is impossible to talk about skill development. Rather, the focus should be on the beginnings of skill development and the development of strategies to try to create situations which are favourable to the development of further skills.

In the area of language training specifically the assumption was made that it is important for the black school leaver to focus on strategies of learning during an orientation course. Blacks, as L2 speakers with understandable language problems, can ill-afford to say "I don't understand" in the workplace, or pretend to understand when they do not. They therefore need to develop strategies for clarification which will not feed into existing negative stereotypes whites have of black employees.

In brief, then, the objectives of the language course specifically are to develop the following skills which are central to coping with interaction and communication demands at work:

- listening and clarifying skills
- speaking skills
- effective skills for communicating across racial and status groups
- reading for information skills
- work specific writing skills

o The first three skills, i.e. listening and clarifying, speaking and effective interpersonal communication skills, include

- initiating discourse
- keeping the lines of communication open, and
- organising discourse[10].

This also involves the analysis and understanding of prevailing stereotypes and attitudes in the workplace.

o Reading for information skills involve the extraction of key information and summarising skills.

o   <u>Work-specific writing skills</u> include

- message taking
- paraphrasing
- logical ordering of information
- letter and memo writing
- report writing

The various aspects of the language course are integrated and reinforced through <u>practical project work</u> and through a <u>thematic approach</u>. For example, language skills are developed in the context of the principles of interpersonal communication. This approach is strengthened through themes which run concurrent with the different facets of interpersonal communication.

The first theme dealt with is "A Critical Assessment of the Value of Education and Training". Students work through a number of current readings on the state of education and training, and in the process develop a critical stance, and perhaps, an attitudinal shift in regard to the value of education and the realities of educational systems in South Africa.

An implicit (and at times explicit) aim here is to facilitate a more informed opinion about the value of education and training. It has been observed that black school-leavers have high aspirations and often experience intense frustration when they achieve what they consider a 'rite of passage' to employment and progress (i.e. a matriculation certificate or even a university degree). When there is very little progress, blacks often believe the reason for this to be discrimination. A strategy which seems to be used to counteract discrimination is to sign up for yet another course or degree[11]. What is aimed at with this theme is therefore a shift from an over-concern with the <u>product</u> of efforts, to a concern with <u>process</u>. A useful side effect is that students start to realise that any educational or social 'deficits' they may have are due to structural constraints, and not due to their inability to compete with white, Asian or coloured counterparts. The onus is, however, on them to bridge a gap they may not have had part in creating.

Their project involves interviews with members of the community they identify as the target group. The interviews are taped, transcribed and analysed in terms of

- information on attitudes they have gathered,
- effective communication strategies they have used, and
- barriers to effective communication.

Control is in the hands of students who design the questions they would like to ask.

The design of the questionnaire in itself offers an opportunity to practice a unique language activity: in order to avoid ambiguity, students need to anticipate possible interpretations and responses to questions. They need to 'prune' their questions in order to make them clear and unambiguous. Questions also need to be grouped and ordered.

Other projects and themes include the following:

The theme "Women in Society" offers a different 'struggle' especially appreciated by women on the course who invariably have to cope with traditional role prescriptions. This theme also challenges certain preconceived role expectations men on the course may have of women.

The project students work on in this context is the presentation of personal histories of black women by whom they have been impressed. This entails the planning and execution of in-depth interviews, the writing up of information gathered, as well as the presentation thereof.

A useful consequence of this type of project is that students consciously choose black role models and, in an indirect way, analyse the personality traits of a person they admire.

Another important theme dealt with is "Employment", and, linked to this, "Urban Society" and "The Age of Technology". Here the emphasis shifts from communicating with people who are perceived to be alike to people outside the students' community and training experience.

Practical project work here involves interviews with personnel managers with the explicit aims of

(1) gathering information on
    -    expectations employers have of new employees,
    -    problems new employees experience in adjusting to the workplace, and
    -    problems specific to new black employees; and

(2) analysing the interaction during the interview in terms of effectiveness or otherwise.

A useful dynamic in this type of activity is the role reversal which students experience - they do the interviewing whilst employers have to do the explaining.

A final activity on the Work Orientation and Language Programme is a seminar which deals directly with the black school-leaver and employment. Students work in pairs or groups and prepare papers for presentation. Different interest groups, including prospective employers, are invited to the seminar, and, once again, control is in the hands of the students who organise and present the seminar. The issues discussed at the seminar also become integrated in a newsletter which the students produce.

It is suggested that activities such as these have value in so far as they become instrumental in breaking down negative stereotypes employers may have of black school-leavers. The only possible limitation is that there normally is a small audience which is already well aware of factors which may affect a black school-leaver's access to employment as well as his or her progress in the workplace.

In sum, a few points about the approach:

Although the programme is structured, the structure lies in the <u>process</u> and not in the content, which remains largely negotiable and flexible.

The emphasis on the development of awareness is based on information giving and gathering in a very practical sense. Here the emphasis may be on education (i.e., the development of awareness and insight into processes operant in the workplace, and strategies necessary for coping) more than on training (i.e. the development of skills for short term adaptation). It is necessary to point out, however, that the balance between 'education' and 'training' involves a value commitment and an ideological stance on the part of programme designers and implementers. This balance will be affected by the organisational climate and the attitude of trainers towards so-called 'black advancement'.

In this regard the programme benefits from its location within the Career Information Centre, a non-profit organisation situated 'between' schools and employers. Training takes place at the Centre and the students become an integral part of the organisation which they also find to be a major source of support once they seek and find employment.

The concern with the development of understanding and with an analytical approach toward learning may, however, at times be at the expense of the development of 'hard' skills. For example, specific aspects of language usage is perhaps too incidental in the language training course.

A final consideration is that after two years of constant involvement in research and training the authors cannot help but have the nagging feeling that the programme may have conceptually over-prepared students for the workplace, especially in the area of interactional skills. They have to work alongside supervisors and colleagues who give very little thought, if any, to the interactional process between black and white.

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Notes

1. 7th Report on the Signatory Companies to the Sullivan Principles. (Prepared for Rev. H.L. Sullivan by Arthur D. Little Inc. 1983).

2. Elda Morran and Lawrence Schlemmer. Research report on the problems of and prospects for black advancement, (title and date forthcoming, Durban: Centre for Applied Social Sciences).

3. Lawrence Schlemmer and Davine Thaw, April 1984. "Problems in Commitment: A Study of Issues and Adaptation of Black People to Expectations in the Urban Industrial Milieu", Durban: Centre for Applied Social Sciences.

4. The design of a 3-month orientation programme, and the actual training, were jointly undertaken by the two researchers/trainers on this project and trainers at the Career Information Centre.

5. Eric Mafuna, September 1981, "The Black Executive Sponsorship System: A Black Management Forum Approach to developing black management leadership". 25th International Convention of the International Personnel Management.

6. A checklist of specific but non-technical skills necessary for adjustment to and progress in the workplace was submitted to samples of employers and supervisors (N=160) and school-leavers (N=40).

7. A modified version of Kelly's Repertory grid technique was used to investigate perceptions new employees have of the workplace. (Whites N=50; Asians N=50; Africans N=100). Instead of imposing a set of researcher-defined concepts on respondents, new employees used, in a variety of exercises, their own constructions in identifying people they interact with at work, and feelings they associate with these 'significant others'.

8. See, for example,

   - McClelland, D.C. and Miron, D. 1979. "The Impact of Achievement Motivation Training on Small Businesses". California Management Review, 21 (4).

-   Nasser, M.E. 1980. "Need for Achievement: The Base for Black Managerial Development". A Position Paper. Pretoria School of Business Leadership, UNISA.

-   March 1984: "The Reality of Black Advancement". Paper presented at a UNISA School for Business Leadership Seminar on "Bridging Education for Black Advancement", Johannesburg. March 1984.

-   McWilliam Smith, A.B.I., 1981: "The Need for Achievement and Economic Growth - Its Relevance to Southern Africa", Development Studies Southern Africa, 3(3), p. 222-242.

9.   In order to explore adaptation problems and typical interactional situations in the workplace, the author became a new employee in one of the major banks in Durban. This entailed participation in an induction course and actual work in some departments. See H. McCarthy, "The Social Adaptation of Black Recruits in a Major Bank: A preliminary report based on an observation study in the workplace". Unpublished paper: Centre for Applied Social Sciences, Durban, May 1983.

10. Mervyn Ogle, October 1983: "Intercultural Communication and ESP: The development of suitable methods and materials". Honours project, Department of General Linguistics and Communication, University of Natal, Durban.

11. The observation study referred to in 9) above was followed by semi-structured in-depth interviews with new employees about problems of adjustment (N=30). Additional discussions with more senior blacks in the bank supplemented insights into 'coping' strategies such as these.