

## The School as a Social Organization

IN attempting better to understand the behavior of teachers and educational administrators, it is helpful to employ certain sociological concepts. The school is basically a social organization characterized by structure and by norms. Structure refers to the relative rankings, both formal and informal, of positions and individuals within the organization, and norms refer to standards for behavior within the system. While most of us who are familiar with schools recognize that such rankings and standards exist, they have not received the careful study and attention which their central place in influencing behavior warrants.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the school as a social organization with special emphasis on what might be called the "teacher culture." For the school principal who hopes to promote successful innovation and change, this area is of great importance. Yet, it has largely been neglected by both educational researchers and educational practitioners.

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Donald J. Willower is Associate Professor of Education, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park. Catherine F. Carr is an elementary principal in the College Area Schools, Centre County, Pennsylvania.

Studies in the sociology of education have examined the impact of the larger society upon the school,<sup>1</sup> and have been concerned with the classroom as a social system,<sup>2</sup> but have generally ignored the teacher culture. Similarly, research on teacher behavior has emphasized description and assessment,<sup>3</sup> and when attention has been given to the grounds for teacher behavior, psychological rather than sociological factors usually have been stressed.

One study which examined the social system of an elementary school was conducted by Iannaccone.<sup>4</sup> He used the concepts of formal and informal organization, as well as the concept of semi-formal organization, to analyze the data

(Continued on page 254)

<sup>1</sup> One example is A. B. Hollingshead, *Elm-town's Youth*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1949.

<sup>2</sup> An interesting general treatment of this topic is Mary A. Bany and Lois V. Johnson, *Classroom Group Behavior*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1964.

<sup>3</sup> For a review of much of this research see David G. Ryans, "Assessment of Teacher Behavior and Instruction," *Review of Educational Research* 33:415-41; October 1963.

<sup>4</sup> Parts of this study are reported in Daniel E. Griffiths, David L. Clark, D. Richard Wynn and Laurence Iannaccone, *Organizing Schools for Effective Education*, Danville, Ill.: The Interstate Printers and Publishers, 1962. p. 225-93.

he gathered, particularly those data related to communication channels within both the school and the school system, and to teacher interactions and attitudes within the school.

In another study conducted in a junior high school, Willower and Jones<sup>5</sup> examined social structure, and norms for teacher behavior particularly as these influenced teacher-teacher and teacher-administrator relationships.

### The School as a Social System

One must be especially cautious about generalizing the findings of these exploratory studies. However, it is useful to discuss and even to speculate about educational organizations within the framework such research and the theory which guided it provides.

Informal organization in the school may be characterized by few or by many groupings, depending upon such things as the size of the school faculty and its homogeneity. Teacher groupings may be related to various factors. In the Iannaccone study, these were factors such as age, proximity of teaching stations and grade levels taught, and attitudes concerning the special teachers, the principal, and parent-teacher relations.

In the Willower-Jones study, these were age, length of service at the school, and liberal versus conservative educational viewpoints. That informal groups within the school may be in conflict with one another at certain points is clear from both studies.

<sup>5</sup>D. J. Willower and R. G. Jones. "When Pupil Control Becomes an Institutional Theme." *Phi Delta Kappan* 45; November 1963.

In the study conducted in the junior high school, certain of the norms for teacher behavior centered in the area of pupil control. The older teachers in particular, dominant in the school's informal organization, stressed order, firmness and discipline, and opposed permissiveness. It appears that elementary teachers tend to accept permissive educational viewpoints to a greater extent than their more traditional secondary school colleagues.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the public school is a special type of organization which cannot select its clients, and whose clients have no choice concerning their participation in the organization.<sup>7</sup> That control should be identified as central in such organizations is not surprising.<sup>8</sup> However, we suspect that the specific focal points for pupil control will vary somewhat in elementary and secondary schools.

Because the isolation of the elementary school's self-contained classroom decreases visibility and even promotes teacher autonomy in matters of pupil control within the classroom, control problems likely to become important in teacher-teacher or teacher-administrator relations will probably arise in situations of greater visibility. Examples of such situations occur in the cafeteria, library, assembly, playground, and in special classes such as those in art or music.

<sup>6</sup>See David G. Ryans, *Characteristics of Teachers*, Washington, D. C.: American Council on Education, 1960. p. 385.

<sup>7</sup>Richard O. Carlson. "Environmental Constraints and Organizational Consequences: The Public School and Its Clients." *Behavioral Science and Educational Administration*. Daniel E. Griffiths, editor. Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, 1964. Chapter 12.

<sup>8</sup>Control is a major variable in studies of other organizations of the same type. Studies of prisons and mental hospitals are useful in providing research leads concerning schools. For example, the concept of goal displacement, common in such studies, may be fruitfully applied to educational organizations.

Teacher attitudes concerning pupil control in such settings might lead to conflict between teacher groups, particularly if such groups are split along the lines of liberal versus conservative educational viewpoints.

In both elementary and secondary schools, innovations in curricular and other matters often will be assessed by teachers in terms of their expected effect on pupil control. Concern with pupil control may become a focal point for teacher resistance to liberalizing changes in schools.<sup>9</sup> In addition, administrators frequently will be evaluated by teachers in terms of whether or not they are perceived as "backing" teachers in matters of pupil control, and in the disputes with parents which control problems sometimes occasion.

These considerations offer some clues at least as to the nature of the school as a social organization. Certainly, our knowledge in this area is very limited and rather tenuous but it should grow both in quantity and in depth of insight as further studies are conducted.

### Implications for the School Principal

The function of the principal should be to do all that he or she can to accomplish the school's goals and to achieve educational ideals. If this task is to be carried out effectively, accurate perceptions concerning social structure within the school, and of the norms governing teacher behavior are crucial. Such perceptions may lead the principal to support the informal organization at some points and to oppose it at others. For example, the principal might want to

<sup>9</sup> See D. J. Willower, "Barriers to Change in Educational Organizations," *Theory into Practice*, 2; December 1963.

encourage and protect innovative teachers who may encounter opposition from certain elements of the informal organization.

In the study of the junior high school mentioned earlier, newer teachers who were idealistic and liberal in their educational viewpoints had special problems in coping with the more conservative and dominant older teachers. The principal could interpose his or her authority at such points, calling into question the legitimacy of norms directed toward short range goals involving pupil control, and stressing instead longer-range, more professionally oriented instructional goals. Avoiding the displacement of instructional goals by control goals may be a major problem for the principal. In dealing with such problems, the perspective afforded by viewing the school as a social system will be basic. This perspective should enable the principal more effectively to experiment with a variety of goal-oriented strategies, and to avoid the unanticipated consequences of administrative actions based upon useless recipes or nostrums.

In carrying out the administrative function, the principal's behavior should be open and genuine, based upon a strong but viable commitment to the achievement of educational ideals. In short, the principal's behavior should be authentic.<sup>10</sup>

Such behavior, wedded to knowledge about the school as a social organization, seems to us to have much potential for the principal who seeks to move his or her organization along the path of productive change.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew W. Halpin and Don B. Croft. *The Organizational Climate of Schools*. Chicago: The Midwest Administration Center, The University of Chicago, 1963. See especially Chapter 5.

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