

The Principal and Instruction: Combining Bureaucratic and Cultural Linkages

Principals need to use all available linkages—the mechanisms that coordinate people's activities—to build commitment to "what we are about."



The contribution of the principal to school improvement is gaining increased attention. While many reform reports have not addressed this issue, a central question requiring further analysis is how, exactly, principals influence the instructional work of their schools.

Two very different schools of thought have dominated the discussion of this issue. The first, influenced by a long tradition of organizational research, suggests that schools are loosely linked organizations with limited opportunities for principals to influence teachers' work.¹ This view was well summarized by James March: "Changing education by changing educational administration is like changing the course of the Mississippi by spitting in the Allegheny."² Another perspective has been spawned by the effective schools research. This literature argues that strong leadership has a positive impact on the quality of instruction.³

Can these seemingly contradictory perspectives be resolved? Yes, but only by examining the *full* range of linkage mechanisms in schools. Linkages are mechanisms that coordinate people's activities. They range from job descriptions to clique structures (of teachers as well as students), from schedules to unwritten rules about how to address students, from supervision conferences to informal conversations. Schools are loosely linked organizations, it is true, but they have more linkages than have been considered in the past. By examining and orchestrating the full range of linkages, the principal can become a strong support for effective instruction in a school.

Bureaucratic and Cultural Linkages

Researchers agree that schools are more loosely linked than other organizations. While they do not always agree on what the relevant linkage mechanisms are, most commentators focus on the lack of strong bureaucratic ties, especially those related to the principal's formal authority.⁴

Bureaucratic linkages are the formal, enduring arrangements in a



school that guide its operation. These include its rules, procedures, and authority relations. One group of researchers refers to them as the "prescribed framework" of the organization.⁵ They are the formal mechanisms designed to control the behavior of organizational members. But they are only part of the picture of how activity is coordinated in a school.

The culture of the school is another factor that contributes to coordination. Cultural linkages include the system of collectively accepted meanings, beliefs, values, and assumptions that organizational members (teachers) use to guide their regular, daily actions and interpret their surroundings.⁶ These linkages have been likened to the glue that holds organizations together.⁷ However, a full understanding of a school's culture and the principal's role in it requires a focus not only on its content—shared meanings—but also on the means of communicating that content.

Because the culture is more elusive than the prescribed framework, it has rarely been considered as one of the linkage mechanisms at the principal's disposal.⁸ Yet a growing business literature suggests that an important responsibility for the manager is to create coherence between an organization's basic purpose and its larger environment.⁹ In schools, strong cultures with appropriate content can promote instructional improvement. Principals can play an important role in creating, maintaining, or changing such cultures.

Cultural linkages, like bureaucratic linkages, are too weak to make a great difference by themselves. Before we

can consider the interaction of bureaucratic and cultural linkages, we must first have a clear understanding of each linkage, how it affects instruction, and the role of the principal.

Linkages, Instruction, and the Principal

The relationship between linkages and instruction works in various ways. Briefly, bureaucratic linkages establish constraints and opportunities on what, where, to whom, and for how long teachers teach. Cultural linkages shape what teachers want to do or how they take advantage of those constraints. Let's look at the effects of each kind of linkage on instruction.

Bureaucratic linkages. The most common way in which principals are thought to affect instruction is through the bureaucratic device of close supervision and evaluation of teachers' activities.¹⁰ This is viewed as the primary means of control, and the literature emphasizes the importance of engaging in frequent supervision. Yet supervision is not a frequent activity.¹¹ Second, there are few incentives for principals to do more than pay lip service to the process of supervision. There are few sanctions or rewards for principals to make supervision a top priority. Finally, effective supervision requires follow-up work. Resources must be committed to activities that can improve noted deficiencies. Most principals have had little or no experience in working with such programs.

This argument that supervision is, in fact, not the crucial bureaucratic linkage in schools does not mean that bureaucratic linkages have no value. Rather, more attention should be paid to bureaucratic linkages that focus on the indirect control of teachers' behavior. These are much easier for principals to work with. How instruction is carried out depends on the way work is formally structured. The principal has considerable influence over a number of key work structures. By altering work structures, the principal can affect how teachers interact with each other and how they feel about their work.

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Here are five examples of bureaucratic linkages to work structures along with ways the principal can use them to influence instruction positively.¹²

- The principal is a key actor in controlling organizational constraints on the amount of *time* students spend on academic tasks. The principal can make a powerful impact by protecting classrooms from external interruptions and altering activities to maximize instructional time. One strategy is to guard prime instructional time zealously. The principal at Garden Hills School in Atlanta, Georgia, makes this point when he says, “The school holds sacred an uninterrupted basic skills time block each morning. The time from 9:00 to 10:30 cannot be interrupted.”¹³

Another way to increase time is to ease noninstructional duties for teachers. The principal at Laura B. Sprague School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, has organized the schedule so that teachers have no responsibility for lunch money collection, study hall, or other duties “which would keep them away from their primary task of educating children.” These bureaucratic linkages help establish that academic learning time is most important.

- *Class size* and the *grouping* of students have an important effect on the way classroom instruction is delivered. By controlling the number of children in a particular room and the mix of gender, race, or ages, the principal can influence the quality of instruction and ultimately student achievement.¹⁴

Shaker Heights High School in Ohio offers a useful example. In the last two decades the proportion of black students in this school has increased from 8 percent to 40 percent. Academic excellence has always been a hallmark of the school; the challenge was to continue that excellence with a changing student population. The first response was to create a streaming system, which produced *de facto* segregation and a negative reaction from the black community. Using ideas from the community, the school has implemented a number of new recommendations and garnered support for improvements. As the principal commented: “The issue is on everyone’s agenda, and there is a genuine concern about doing better. We have accepted it as our problem, one that we are willing to struggle with until we find some answers.”

- Principals can also influence the working patterns of teachers by arranging physical space and free time to promote norms of *collegiality* and *experimentation*, both of which have been associated with effectiveness.¹⁵

Promoting collegiality is well illustrated by Northfield Elementary School in Ellicott City, Maryland. The school works hard to ensure that teachers working at the same grade level have joint planning periods to encourage collaborative efforts, to set aside time at meetings for sharing of inservice experiences, and to structure opportunities for teachers to observe each other’s work.

- Principals often have some discretionary *resources* (money, released time, materials) at their disposal and, through their judicious distribution, can greatly enhance innovative instructional activities.

Discretionary resources are often associated with wealthy communities. However, the staff at Byng High School, Ada, Oklahoma, a poor school with almost half the students from low-income families, have improvised with real creativity. By using donated land, stockpiling building materials when a favorable price presented itself, and having construction done by vocational students and maintenance staff, they have created a masterpiece facility. But more important than the physical plant itself is the pride engendered by the whole school involvement. As one observer noted, “The teachers don’t think of themselves as poor, they think of themselves as resourceful.” In creating such an image, they have created a climate conducive to learning.

- *Knowledge* and *skills* are another area where linkages can be tightened. Principals can encourage the use of previously unused or underused skills within a classroom as well as networking those skills among teachers. The principal can also encourage teachers to seek new knowledge and facilitate that activity by recommending training sessions and providing resources for attendance.

Inservice activities are an obvious vehicle for the development of knowledge and skills. Yet staff at many schools seem to be simply going through the motions—attending the meetings but retaining or using little from them. The principal at Eakin School in Nashville, Tennessee, has actively involved teachers in planning these activities as a means to tighten this linkage. A teacher committee at Eakin conducts a needs assessment for inservice activities, sets priorities, plans programs, secures consultants, and evaluates the success of the programs.

Cultural linkages. Cultural linkages work on the consciousness of teachers by clarifying what they do and defining their commitment to the task.¹⁶ Task definitions create the standards and expectations that are so important for instruction. Commitment is an issue because education is often viewed as

an occupation to which people are weakly committed.

Typically, the cultural themes that build commitment and define standards are expressed through stories or rituals. Stories include myths and legends as well as actual events. They emphasize positively or negatively valued traits of the school. The principal's goal is for the stories to reinforce preferred values. Regardless of their basis in fact, if such stories are told effectively, they become a powerful tool for making people believe the school really works a certain way and that its members should act accordingly.

Principals can manage the flow of stories and other information about their schools. An example of constructive stories that reinforce a positive view of how to enhance discipline in the school is reported by Mary Metz in her study of desegregated schools.¹⁷ The principal has tried to communicate that behavior problems were rare individual outbursts that teachers could easily handle. A recalcitrant student said, "I ain't going to study today, 'cause I don't feel like it." The teacher just grinned and said, "Well, I'm going to give you a book just in case you change your mind." In five minutes the student was studying. Such a story carries the message of an important value that was prized in that school.

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Rituals are another way to communicate the school's culture. These repeated ceremonial activities include assemblies, teacher meetings, and parent-teacher conferences. A principal can also create and shape rituals. By placing a priority on academic assemblies or rewards for especially effective teachers, the principal can define preferred behaviors. In some cases, the principal may actually become a symbol. The principal's own department can symbolize to other adults and students in the school a new order where education is taken more seriously.¹⁸

Terry Deal writes about a powerful ritual at Concord High School in Massachusetts, where parents host a celebration in honor of teachers.

They decorated the cafeteria and put silver candle holders on tables covered with white linen. Each teacher received a corsage on arrival bearing the terms *guru*, *mentor*, *guide*, and *teacher*. Parents and teachers sang around a piano bar, drinking wine and eating cheese. Dinner was potluck; each parent brought a dish. After dinner, speeches and choral music from students completed the evening.¹⁹

This represents a forceful ritual ceremony that helped build a sense of identity with and commitment to the organization.

Another equally important aspect of communicating the culture of the school comes from the specialized, informal communication roles that facilitate the transfer of stories and the operation of rituals. These include whisperers, gossipers, and secretarial sources, among others. Stories and rituals build meaning through the ongoing flow of communications that ensures they are appropriately interpreted. While a variety of people may fill those communication roles, the principal can structure situations to maximize the exposure of key storytellers.

A creative example of the use of storytellers comes from Barrington Elementary School in Upper Arlington, Ohio. The school has created a buddy system that matches new parents in the community with "old-timers." The old-timers serve the function of com-

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municating a sense of the school to the uninitiated. They establish a positive link with newcomers that builds ownership and pride in the school. The old-timers also serve as a useful recruiting device to get people to attend and volunteer for important ceremonies and rituals in the school.

Finally, the principal is a central communicator of the culture. Anyone familiar with the day-to-day experience of being a principal is acutely aware of the multiple impromptu opportunities that exist to interact with teachers and students. (Principals are constantly "wandering around" the school, a management technique highly rated in recent research.) By introducing more consistency across these hundreds of interactions, the principal may be able to use them to influence the culture for instruction constructively.

An excellent example of how the power of communication can influence a school comes from John Bartram High School in Philadelphia, which has over 3,600 students and 265 professional staff. The principal cannot communicate directly with everyone on a daily basis. However, he uses three strategies to communicate effectively with his staff.²⁰ First, he has an active cabinet of vice principals and

department heads. All important issues are discussed in that group before the principal makes a decision. Teachers can also raise issues with their department heads, who then bring them up in cabinet meetings. According to one of his department heads, "Lou rolls things off of us. . . . He is successful because he is a team man." In addition, he turned an office on the top floor of the school into a lounge. Periodically, he announces that he will be in that room. Teachers are then free to come to him to raise issues. All of this is in addition to having an open-door policy so that teachers can approach him with a variety of personal and professional concerns.

Combining Linkages: A Delicate Balancing Act

Although bureaucratic and cultural linkages in a school are conceptually distinct, the efforts of the principal to influence one linkage may influence both. This can work for the principal if effects on both linkages are complementary, but it will be counterproductive if those effects are contradictory. Several concrete examples may help clarify this issue.

First, let's consider how the positive development of a bureaucratic linkage mechanism can actually have negative effects on the school's culture. Grouping patterns for students are essentially a bureaucratic means intended to facilitate instruction. Grouping to minimize variation in ability allows classes with faster students to move more quickly through the curriculum and to address more complex topics. Meanwhile, classes with slower students proceed less quickly and cover material more intensively until it is learned. Thus, from a purely management perspective, there appears to be an advantage to ability grouping. However, ability grouping also labels students and creates differential expectations for what they will learn. When these expectations are internalized both by the teacher and the students, they help define what can be accomplished in the classroom. That definition of classroom activities is a critical aspect of what we mean by culture. To the

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extent that these expectations really do affect what students learn, ability grouping may seriously limit the progress of slower students. Thus, what appears from a bureaucratic perspective to be constructive can create a culture that works against slower-learning students.

Another example, which relates to discipline in schools, illustrates how too much of a good thing from a bureaucratic perspective can hinder a complementary behavior from the cultural linkage perspective. Any disciplinary plan that effectively maintains order in a school will increase time for instruction and, therefore, improve opportunities for effective instruction through a bureaucratic linkage. However, not all strong discipline codes have positive effects. As the Phi Delta Kappan Commission on Discipline points out,²¹ discipline can be oppressive if not handled properly. An authoritarian approach that fails to create student ownership in the process is doomed to failure. For a discipline plan to support an effective instruc-

tional program, the culture of the school must reinforce norms of collective responsibility.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the codification of rules. Obviously some rules need to be formally articulated—preferably through a process that involves students, teachers, and administrators—but it is the informal rules that actually guide and direct the school's daily activities. These informal rules are the "tacit understanding of how all individuals are expected to treat one another."²² These norms are embedded in the culture of the school, and if that culture is consistent with the positive norms of behavior, then attention to instruction will increase.

The final example illustrates how a bureaucratic linkage can have constructive effects in its own right while also improving the school's culture for instruction. Discretionary funds, while limited, can be a very effective means of promoting instructional innovation if directed toward the right teachers and at the proper content area. In addition to this positive bureaucratic effect, the judicious allocation of resources can promote commitment among teachers and signal to the faculty that instructional priorities are more important than other concerns in the school, such as the extracurriculum. This enhanced commitment and a focus on "what we are about" at a school are critical components of our concept of cultural linkages.

A Clear Vision

No single linkage can make a powerful impact on the instructional program. Rather, the principal has a number of weak means of control or coordination that can be used with teachers over the course of the school day and year. The problem is that these interactions are so numerous and disconnected that any focus is often blurred. The principal's task is to develop a clear vision of the school's purposes to give primacy to instruction, and then employ it consistently during these countless interactions. The principal thus uses bureaucratic linkages to create opportunities for teachers to follow that vision and, at the same time,

uses cultural linkages to ensure that that vision can become the teachers' own culture. □

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1. Two of the earliest and clearest discussions of linkage in schools are offered by C. E. Bidwell, "The Schools as a Formal Organization," in *Handbook of Organizations*, ed. J. G. March (Skokie, Ill.: Rand-McNally, 1965); and K. E. Weick, "Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 21 (1976): 1-19.

2. J. G. March, "American Public School Administration: A Short Analysis," *American Journal of Education* 86 (1978): 217-250.

3. W. Brookover, C. Beady, P. Flood, J. Schweitzer, and J. Wisenbaker, *School Social Systems and Student Achievement: Schools Can Make a Difference* (New York: Praeger, 1979); J. B. Wellisch, A. H. MacQueen, R. A. Carriere, and G. A. Duck, "School Management and Organization in Successful Schools (ESAA In-depth Study Schools)," *Sociology of Education* 51 (1978): 211-227.

4. For example, see M. B. Miles, "Mapping the Common Properties in Schools," in *Improving Schools: Using What We Know*, ed. R. Lehming and M. Kane (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981); and J. W. Meyer and B. Rowan, "The Structure of Educational Organizations," in *Environments and Organizations: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives*, ed. M. Meyers and associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978).

5. For a full discussion of this concept, see S. Ranson, N. Hinings, and R. Greenwood, "The Structuring of Organizational Structures," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 25 (1980): 1-17. It should be noted that the problem with focusing exclusively on the prescribed framework is the assumption that these formal arrangements determine behavior. It ignores the facts that the prescribed framework is periodically

renegotiated and that it is frequently violated.

6. The clearest presentation of what is meant by an organizational culture is offered by A. M. Pettigrew, "On Studies of Organizational Cultures," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 24 (1979): 570-581.

7. This analogy was originally offered by T. E. Deal and A. Kennedy, *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1982).

8. There have been few studies of the professional cultures of schools; more emphasis has been placed on student cultures. Two recent examples that begin to fill the void include S. L. Lightfoot, *The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); and P. A. Cusick, *The Egalitarian Ideal and the American High School. Studies of Three Schools* (New York: Longman, 1983).

9. The two most well-known references include Deal and Kennedy, *op. cit.*, and T. J. Peters and R. H. Waterman, *In Search of Excellence: Lessons From America's Best-Run Companies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).

10. This view has been reinforced by much of the effective schools research, which places a premium on leadership. Effective supervision is often tantamount to effective leadership since it is so direct: the principal is personally helping the teacher to become more effective.

11. Recent observational studies of principals have clearly documented the lack of attention paid to supervision. Two examples include V. Morris, R. L. Crowson, C. Porter-Gehrie, and E. Hurwitz, *Principals in Action: The Reality of Managing Schools* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill, 1984); and N. A. Newberg and A. G. Glatt-horn, *Instructional Leadership: Four Ethnographic Studies on Junior High School Principals* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983).

12. The first three of the five examples have been adapted from the work of S. T. Bossert, D. C. Dwyer, B. Rowan, and G. V. Lee, "The Instructional Management Role of the Principal," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 18 (1982): 34-64.

13. Unless noted otherwise, the specific examples are drawn from schools recognized for their unusually successful programs and practices by the U.S. Department of Education. More documentation on these and other examples can be found in T. B. Corcoran and B. L. Wilson, *The Search for Successful Secondary Schools: The First Three Years of the Secondary*

School Recognition Program (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1986); and B. L. Wilson and T. B. Corcoran, *Places Where Children Succeed: A Profile of Outstanding Elementary Schools* (Philadelphia: Research for Better Schools, 1987).

14. See T. Beckerman and T. L. Good, "The Classroom Ratio of High- and Low-Aptitude Students and Its Effect on Achievement," *American Educational Research Journal* 18 (1981): 317-327; and S. T. Bossert, "Activity Structures and Student Outcomes" (paper presented at the National Invitational Conference on School Organization and Its Effects, San Diego, 1978).

15. See J. W. Little, "Norms of Collegiality and Experimentation: Workplace Conditions of School Success," *American Educational Research Journal* 19 (1982): 325-340.

16. A more complete discussion of what is meant by the professional culture of a school is offered in W. A. Firestone and B. L. Wilson, "What Can Principals Do? Culture of School Is a Key to More Effective Instruction," *NASSP Bulletin* 63 (1984): 7-11; and G. B. Rossman, H. D. Corbett, and W. A. Firestone, *Culture, Change, and Effectiveness* (Albany: SUNY Press, in press).

17. M. H. Metz, *Classrooms and Corridors: The Crisis of Authority in Desegregated Schools* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

18. However, it should be pointed out that sheer energy and enthusiasm will not be adequate to change most situations. Indeed, the principal needs the support of key actors who can help to consistently reinforce the key themes of the culture.

19. T. E. Deal, "The Symbolism of Effective Schools," *Elementary School Journal* 85 (1985): 601-620.

20. A more detailed report may be found in S. Rosenblum and W. A. Firestone, "Alienation and Commitment in Big City Schools" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, D.C., 1987).

21. For a summary of this perspective, see W. W. Wayson and T. J. Lasley, "Climates for Excellence: Schools that Foster Self-Discipline," *Pbi Delta Kappan* 65 (1984): 419-421.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 421.

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