Educational Considerations

Volume 3 | Number 1 Article 7

9-1-1975

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Recommended Citation

Schultz, Frederick M. (1975) "Schools and School Systems as Formal Organizations," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 3: No. 1. https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2094

An educational sociologist looks at bureaucracy and red tape in educational systems.

schools and school systems as formal organizations

by Frederick M. Schultz

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Any school, whether it be a public school or a privately controlled one, is forced to formally organize its staff around the basic educational objectives which constitute the reasons for its existence. Many people (teachers, students, laymen) complain about "educational bureaucracies"; yet many people who complain about "bureaucratic red tape" in the performance of educational services fail to realize that "bureaucracy" is but one name for any legally constituted organization which has a formal set of objectives to achieve which require some sort of hierarchically ordered levels of functions.

"Bureaucracy" is a concept which relates to the need to formally organize the talents, interests, and efforts of the staff of an organization for the most efficient performance of services for the clients of the organization; in our case as educators our clients are our students. There are productive and efficient educational systems and there are inefficient and less productive ones. The reasons for effectiveness or ineffectiveness in such organizations will be more evident if we define the basic elements which operate in any formally structured educational system. It is not bureaucratic structure, as such, which is the enemy of efficient student-centered educational services, for any school system must formally organize its talents and interests in a hierarchy to achieve its educational goals. The problem is not whether to have or not to have some form of organizational structure in a school, but rather *how best* to understand and organize that structure for the achievement of maximum service to our clients.

"Bureaucracy" is derived from a French term "bureau" which was a piece of furniture in which documents were stored. The great sociologist Max Weber wrote on the nature of "bureaucracies"; his ideas on this subject were most influential in subsequent discussion of the nature and functions of those formal human social organizations with fixed roles and hierarchies of functions to which this term applies. Yet there are many people today who question some of his views on this matter.[1]

"Bureaucracy" is often used in a negative sense to refer to the complexities of rules and procedures in corporations, military organizations, government agencies, or school systems. Much has been said about the "red tape" and "conformity" dominant in such complex types of social organizations. As societies become more complex they seem to require more complexly structured social organizations to achieve their aims. As a society's technology develops and as

the society becomes more urbanized more and more new sorts of jobs and labor functions develop.

Formal and Informal Bureaucracies

A bureaucratic (or "formal") organization has carefully defined all of the functions of each member of the organization in terms of the *position* or *office* that person holds in the organization. Weber believed in rational or reasoned structures for the attainment of the organized goals of an institution. By an "office" in this context, we don't mean a room or cubicle where a person works but a series of *functions* assigned to the person who holds a particular "office" in the organization. The person doesn't hold the authority as much as the defined *roles* of the office allow the person the privilege of *carrying out its functions*. The leaders of the organization define the functions of each "office" in its organizational structure. Weber's vision of a bureaucracy was that of the beehive in which, from the queen bee on down, there are definite roles for each bee in the hive. The beehive could be said to represent what Weber would have referred to as an "ideal type" of bureaucracy in the sense that the beehive and the Prussian civil bureaucracies of Weber's time represented for him the typical and most characteristic forms of "bureaucracy."

In recent times social theorists have noted that in addition to the *formally* legislated roles and functions of the "offices" of a bureaucratic organization, there are *informal* influences and roles in such organizations. One way of explaining this is to note that the "offices" of any "bureaucracy" are obviously *held or performed* by people, and people exhibit both rational and irrational behaviors. The behaviors of people, as we all know, are not perfectly predictable. Hence, no matter how *rational* or clearly reasoned the *formally legislated* role structure of an organization may be, people can interact with their co-workers in an organization in *personal* as well as *impersonal* ways.

There is always an informal organizational structure in any formal organization. For instance, the people who hold the various "offices" in an organization have those formal, enacted or legislated work functions assigned to them; but they also develop informal social relationships with co-workers at the same organizational level as themselves. There is also the possibility that they will be able to develop informal contacts with certain subordinates or super-ordinates to themselves. They may and do, in other words, develop some informal contacts with one or more of their superiors in the organization as well as with some of the people holding positions at lower levels of the organizational structure than their own.

This means that Weber's "ideal type" of "bureaucracy" may not in fact ever exist today, although there is no question that the Prussian bureaucracies of his day were as highly formalized, rigid, and purely rational in their structure and operation as Weber described them. In school systems there always exists the *formal* bureaucratic organizational structure *and some form of informal* organizational structure. For instance, in a particular school some teachers, whatever their specifically *defined teaching roles*, enjoy greater respect and status with some of their colleagues or administrators than do other teachers. This is true because of length of service in the school, greater than average competency as a teacher, past personal friendships with one or more of the administrators, or from any other reason. Only in a new school just starting operations or in an older school with a totally new professional and secretarial staff would this not be the case, and even in such new or completely "restaffed" school situations an *informal organizational structure of some sort will be well under way to development by the end of the first term.*

The informal organizational structure usually interacts with the formally enacted one; this works to the advantage of some teachers and to the disadvantage of others. But contemporary urban-industrial social-orders *rarely* have any bureaucractic organizational structures that are *purely rational in their actual operation*. They may have been rationally conceived, but they will be operated by people who will perform their respective functions in terms of both formal and informal relationships. It is, for instance, not totally unheard of that a school secretary or custodian in an American school will have more "influence" with the principal or headmaster than any of the first or second year teachers in the building.

Bureaucracy and Change

For Weber, bureaucratic organizations were very difficult to change; it was almost impossible to change them because the functions of *positions* or *offices* remained the same regardless of the persons who occupied them. Hodgkinson points out that in contemporary bureaucracies it is easier for one person in command of an organization to change its bureaucratic structure than it is when authority is shared by a group or conflicting groups of people.[2] Hodgkinson asserts that when power is shared by several groups their respective efforts may conflict causing them to preserve the *status quo* in the organization rather than to change it. Yet he also noted the increasing *decentralization* of bureaucratic structures in many organizations. This trend, as he notes, can allow for greater flexibility in the operation of the organization.[3]

David A. Goslin speaks of the characterizing features of bureaucratic structures in education systems as consisting of:

> ". . . (A) hierarchy of formally defined positions each having a well-defined role and status as well as a specialized function in the organization. Bureaucratization and the concomitant increase in the size of organizations throughout the society (including education) has resulted from two related factors: the search for greater efficiency in the accomplishment of fairly complex tasks (such as the production of automobiles or electronic computers) and the growing degree of technical proficiency required at every stage in the process."[4]

Goslin also notes that educational systems are called upon to do more than teach general intellectual skills or to train people to perform specific vocational functions. The school functions to transmit cherished values and standards of conduct of the society which created it as well as to teach the accepted social behaviors of the society.

Bureaucracy and Schools

We can give a very brief overview of the nature of schools as formal organizations possessing characteristics common of all bureaucratic structures. A summary is given below of the basic structural components typical of "paradigm" uses of bureaucratic structure in educational institutions:

https://newprairiepress.org/edconsiderations/vol3/iss1/7
DOI: 10.4148/0146-9282.2094

1. There are sets of formally defined roles to be performed and responsibilities to be carried out which are located in the "offices" or "positions" specified in an organization's structure.
2. These "offices" or "positions" are arranged in hierarchical order from the top administrative leaders down to the lowest "positions" or "offices" in the structure.
3. There are levels of formally defined offices in this hierarchical structure; thus there may be several "positions" or "offices" parallel to each other at each "level" of the organization's structure. For instance, there may be several "directors" of secondary or elementary education in a school system located under the superintendent or assistant superintendents of schools with *each* of these "directors" having administrative authority over some of the "principals" of schools in the system. At the level of the "office" of "teacher" there can be hundreds or even thousands of teachers in a school system with each teacher possessing similar authorities and responsibilities in the *formal* organizational structure of the systems. Likewise, there are several school principals and assistant principals at the level of administration of particular schools in the system each of whom has defined *formal* authorities and responsibilities. Similar parallel "levels" of offices in the school system hierarchy could be noted concerning school guidance personnel, department chairmen, subject matter supervisors of instruction working out of the central administrative "offices" of the system to guide, evaluate and supervise classroom instruction, *etc.*
4. There is a "rule system" or an explicitly defined set of operational procedures formally defined with reference to the "offices" at each level of the organizational hierarchy from superintendent of schools to the "office" of "student."
5. There are, in conjunction with, or as a component subcategory of, the "rule system" of the bureaucratic structure, other *impersonal* guidelines formally written and prescribed for all *foreseeable* behavioral contingencies or possibilities in the human interactions among the people holding the various "positions" or "offices" in the system. There is, in other words, a conscious effort to provide a rational structure for all officially approved or expected human relationships within the organizational structure.
6. There are thus explicitly stated guidelines to provide *stability of patterns of behavior* among the various "levels" of positions in the organizational structure.
7. There are finely defined *formal* "power bases" or prescribed and carefully *delimited boundaries of formal authorities* in the organizational structure which are broadest at the *highest* "office" in the organizational structure ranging down to highly *constricted or narrow* spheres of formal influence or authority at the *lowest* level of the structure.
8. Finally, but not the least in significance, there are explicitly defined or "manifest" functions and goals for the organizational structure, and there are "latent" functions or goals for the organizational structure which are often most difficult to define or verify with certitude. The "latent" functions reflect, in part, the emergence of the *informal* and often *implicitly informal* individual and group dynamics in the unofficial extension and/or contraction of role or "office" definitions in the operation of the educational system in question over time. Many social, political, and economic factors also influence the emergence of an organization's "latent" functions, factors which have their origins outside of the formal organizational structure in the specific societal context of which the organization is a part.

Conclusion

Criticisms (positive or negative) of the schools cannot proceed intelligently without accurate understanding of the above various distinguishing features of educational bureaucracies. This is the case whether readers of this paper support the concept of formally organized school systems or whether they support other private and informal sorts of learning environments. It is a further conclusion of the present writer that it is *really not* very productive for so much contemporary criticism of "bureaucracy," as such, to proceed in such generalized terms as many contemporary romantic critics of the schools display in their writings. We must, rather, look critically and incisively at the various component interpersonal dynamics of formal educational organizations. For the great generality of the forms of argument used by many romantic critics of the schools achieves little more than a spirit of highly emotive fatalism conducive only to the production of varying degrees of emotional depression and lack of self-confidence among teachers. We are probably all aware that fear or loss of self-confidence is not productive of *either* "self-transcendance" *or* the quest for each individual teacher's fundamentally best identity (or "deep self") as a person in general or a teacher in particular. Therefore, I say that there has been enough journalistic rhetoric among critics of the schools *and* that the time has come, rather, for truly *incisive* and *specific,* creative alternative criticisms of the interpersonal dynamics within schools. Such criticism will not emerge until we learn to think of formal educational organizations in terms of their specific distinguishing features.

FOOTNOTES

1. Harold L. Hodgkinson has a very good discussion of the nature of bureaucracies, and educational bureaucracies in particular, in his volume *Education, Interaction, and Social Change* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), see Chapter 2: "Bureaucratic Structure and Personality," pp. 25-47.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 38
3. *Ibid.*, p. 31
4. David A. Goslin, *The School in Contemporary Society;* (Chicago: Scott Foresman, 1965), pp. 46-47.