The Organization of Schools and Classrooms

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Abstract

Schools are complex organizations and their functioning involves far more than just the delivery of academic content. Existing research establishes the importance of taking such organizational features into account in examining how important school outcomes such as academic achievement are shaped by the relationships, interactions, and experiences of students and teachers. Standard approaches, however; tend to treat the organizational structures of schools as static and unchanging environments within which teachers teach and students learn. In contrast, we present the beginnings of a different conceptualization, one of schools as complex and dynamic social institutions constituted by multiple types of relations and defined at numerous levels. In this essay, we summarize existing research in order to elaborate such a view. To that end the essay is divided into four sections: major role relationships in the school; organizational levels of the school; current socio-cultural changes shaping schools as organizations; and finally, suggestions for future work.

INTRODUCTION: SCHOOLS AS ORGANIZATIONS

Schools are complex organizations and their functioning involves far more than just the delivery of academic content. It also entails the social coordination of students, teachers, and other staff within numerous organizational structures and activities. Existing research establishes the importance of taking such organizational features into account in examining how important school outcomes such as academic achievement are shaped by the relationships, interactions, and experiences of students and teachers (Elmore, 1995).

Standard approaches, however; tend to treat the organizational structures of schools as static and unchanging environments within which teachers teach and students learn (Bidwell, 2001). In contrast, in this essay we present the beginnings of a different conceptualization, one of schools as complex and dynamic social institutions constituted by multiple types of relations and defined at numerous levels, and we summarize existing research in order to elaborate such a view (Frank, 1998). To that end the essay is divided

into four sections: major role relationships in the school; organizational levels of the school; current socio-cultural changes shaping schools as organizations; and finally, suggestions for future work.

MAJOR ROLE RELATIONS

One of, if not the, central functions of organizations is to coordinate and structure the relationships and interactions of its members in pursuit of institutional goals and purposes (Stinchcombe, 1965, p. 142). In the case of primary and secondary schools, the institutional goals concern the technical and moral socialization of youth (Bidwell, 1965). We can understand this coordination in terms of both the formal roles of teachers and students, each coming with its own concomitant set of expectations and obligations (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) and the more interpersonal needs and obligations that shape informal relations (Frank, Zhao, & Borman, 2004). In schools there are at least three primary categories of relational types, each of which cuts across the distinction between formal and informal relations: teacher–student relationships; student peer relationships; and teacher collegial relationships. In examining each in the following sections we show how schools can simultaneously be understood as sites of inter-generational socialization, as student social and cultural systems, and as workplaces for faculty members.

TEACHER–STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

Perhaps the most important relationship in the school is that between teachers and students. However, there is a fundamental tension that runs through student–teacher relationships that pertains to the impersonal bureaucratic aspects of schooling and the more warm and personal relationship we often expect to occur between the young and the adults in charge of them (Noddings, 1992). Research has shown, for example, that students with significant relationships with school adults tend to feel more academically engaged (Marks, 2000), have a stronger academic orientation (Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000), and are more likely to enlist teacher assistance for difficult academic work (Lee & Smith, 1993). At the same time, evidence suggests that as teachers and students develop stronger relationships where teachers may become less likely to academically push students for fear of fracturing the relationship (Phillips, 1997).

STUDENT SOCIAL WORLDS

Schools are also social sites where students learn how to interact with friends, develop and negotiate their identities, and engage with and produce cultural

activities and artifacts (Milner, 2006). At the primary school level, the focus of research and theory has generally concentrated on how children learn the rules and norms of schools as they transition from the personal environment of the home to the more impersonal, bureaucratic environment of school (Corsarom & Eder, 1990). At this age students have yet to develop the group identities which are the hallmark of early and middle adolescence (Brown, 1986). It is in middle and high schools where research has focused on the development of student social worlds with their own rules, norms, and practices. Much of the work in this stream describes high schools as sites of ongoing conflict between school and academic mores (and by extension the adult world) and the mores of the student subculture and its status hierarchies, which stand in sharp contrast to one another (Waller, 1932).

Teacher Faculties and Communities-of-Practice

Finally, schools are workplaces for teachers and other faculty members. Research in this area has examined that how the informal and formal organization of teachers' work provides (or fails to provide) resources for dealing with the everyday problems of teaching (Bidwell & Yasumoto, 1999). Educational research long assumed that teachers generally operate in isolation within their own classrooms and thus largely immune from the social influence of other teachers (Lortie, 1975). More recent work, however; has shown how teacher thinking and practice are both shaped by their social context (Coburn, 2001). Research in this area has grown rapidly in recent years as policy makers and reform leaders have increasingly tied school improvement efforts to the creation of teacher professional communities in schools because of their associated positive academic outcomes (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

ORGANIZATIONAL LEVELS

As argued previously, the social coordination and structuring of student and teacher interactions is one of the key features of schools as organizations. At the same time, however; fully accounting for differences in outcomes also entails examining how interactions are variably shaped by the multilayered nature of the organizational context. Practically speaking, this means studying the social ecology of organizational features in schools at multiple levels and how they interrelate to select for or against particular forms of coordination. In the following section, we examine four nested organizational levels of the school and discuss how they variably shape teacher and student experiences and outcomes. Those levels are: the organizational environment;

organizational structures of selection and differentiation; organizational routines; and the interaction order.

Organizational Environment

The first organizational level of the school that we discuss is that of the organizational environment. Over the past several decades the dominant view in organizational theory has been that the internal organization of the school is largely buffered from, or "loosely coupled" with, its institutional environment (Weick, 1976). This work argues that because there is a lack of general agreement about educational outcomes and shared and effective technologies, school organization is largely explained in terms of its ceremonial ability to signal legitimacy to various audiences, including parents, community members, and policy makers rather than its technical efficiency (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). As such, the core organizational features of schools (i.e., classroom teaching and learning) are significantly buffered from changes in the organizational environment. As we will discuss in the next section, however; even within this institutional stream of research there is an increasing consensus that changes in federal and state policy are recoupling structures to content and having a more direct effect on schools and classrooms than they did in the past (Hallett, 2010).

Structures of Selection and Differentiation

Next we turn to the internal organization of schools, an area over which schools can exert more control. As bureaucracies, one of the central features of school organization is the differentiation of faculty and students along various dimensions. The school faculty is organized around a division-of-labor that differentiates between teachers, administrators, and other support staff like counselors and curriculum specialists. One of the most important developments in the nature of school organization over the past century has been the continuing elaboration of this division-of-labor, with increasingly complex and numerous faculty divisions and roles (Bidwell, 2001). At the same time, teachers are also often differentiated in a more horizontal way by the age of the students and the disciplinary subject they teach. For students, the track or group they are assigned to influences the kinds of pedagogy and curriculum they are exposed to, as well as how they are treated by teachers. One result is that tracking tends to reproduce existing differences related to socioeconomic background and race (Oakes, 1985).

ORGANIZATIONAL ROUTINES

Routines are important because they concern the technical core of schooling (how inputs are processed into outputs) and the process of organizing—they are the means by which roles and relations get conferred and established, and the process by which action is coordinated and work gets done. Routinized academic activities such as lecture, recitation, and group work are the fundamental organizing constructs of classrooms (Doyle, 1986). Routines also provide the foundation for student social worlds and teacher faculties (McFarland, 2005). For students, informal peer interactions entail various routinized communicative activities such as collaborative storytelling, gossip, and ritual teasing (Eder, 1995). Such activities are characterized by rapid, egalitarian, overlapping turns of talk (Goodwin, 1980) and references to adolescent styles and non-school topics such as movies, TV, music, dating, gossip, parties, shopping, and sports (Sieber, 1979, pp. 227–231). The work of the school staff is also structured by institutionalized and informal routines and activities. In most schools, teachers at least occasionally have meetings with other teachers in their same subject or who teach the same aged students. Professional development typically entails formalized activities in which teachers play the role of learner. In staff run schools, there are also formal governance structures and associated routines. Moreover, like all bureaucratic work, teachers engage in many informal interactions and activities in teachers' lounges, hallways, and lunchrooms.

INTERACTIONAL ORDER

The final level we discuss is that of the interaction order, or the actual patterns of face-to-face interaction within the organization. On this level, researchers deal with the structure and meaning of interactions in specific concrete social situations. This entails treating the school—classrooms, hallways, teachers' lounges—as a social ecology that is generated and sustained by repeating patterns of communication in ongoing interaction (McFarland, Diehl, & Rawlings, 2011). The patterning of such interaction is tied not only to routinized activities, but also moral imperatives that are derived from the individual need to present social selves and maintain the interaction process (Goffman, 1983). Interest in this organizational level includes efforts to understand the internal logic that shapes the generation of the interaction order, but also how it impacts student and teacher attitudes and experiences within the school. For example, students who feel engaged with school have higher grades (Willingham, Pollack, & Lewis, 2006), test scores (Roderick & Engel, 2001), and lower drop-out rates (Croninger & Lee, 2001).

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGES AFFECTING SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

These core issues remain central to understanding schools as organizations, but major cultural, social, and political changes over the past several decades have the potential to profoundly reshape them. In the following section, we discuss three such areas. While being driven in different ways, all three of these trends are grounded in a similar belief that the current bureaucratic form of the school is not adequate for accomplishing desired goals and needs to somehow be altered.

Accountability and Recoupling

The dominant perspective, as mentioned earlier, has been to conceptualize schools as loosely coupled systems in which the technical core of classroom teaching and learning is buffered from changes in the school's policy environment. Recently, however; state and federal policymakers have been taking more direct control over what happens in schools by increasingly taking bureaucratic control over curriculum and teaching.

This trend has been most evident in the standards and accountability movements, which have become staples in the policy environment of American schools (Irons & Harris, 2006). While curricular content has traditionally been decided by individual teachers and students, the standards movement is an effort by policymakers to dictate a common set of academic content that all students are expected to learn (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011). Increasingly, this project also entails the use of standardized tests in order measure students' knowledge and to hold teachers and schools "accountable" for how well they do (Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009). Many educational scholars have argued that, by more closely dictating what should be taught in the classroom, and how its uptake should be measured, that the view of schools as loosely coupled has increasingly become outdated (Diamond, 2012).

How exactly the growth of standards and testing regimes impacts school organization, however; remains unclear. This is because these largely top-down state and federally mandated reforms do not specify how they should be implemented at the local level. For this reason, local conditions in terms of existing organizational arrangements, political coalitions, and school history and culture, differentially shape the nature of implementation. In response, research has increasingly focused on how environmental factors make their way through the school doors and into the classroom. This essay suggests that pressures from standards and testing regimes prompt teachers to marginalize subjects not being assessed, to allocate resources based on

students' likelihood of passing tests, and to focus increased amounts of classroom time on the content being tested.

CHOICE, CHARTERS, AND COMPETITION

While the growth of standards and testing has served to strengthen the federal and state control over schools in bureaucratic and regulatory terms, there has been a simultaneous effort to weaken bureaucratic control by opening up schools to the market-based forces. Such efforts can be seen as reflective of a long-term shift of explaining unequal school outcomes not in terms of structural inequalities faced by students outside of school, but rather by deficiencies and inefficiencies in school organization (Sunderman, 2012). From this perspective it is the market, rather than government, that is viewed as the solution to the organizational problems of schools.

The idea that market forces will compel improvements in the organizational forms of schools is reflected in two related efforts to increase school choice: voucher programs and charter schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990). In both cases the underlying assumption of proponents is that by increasing competition among schools, organizational forms that foster student will learning will thrive will those do not will fail. Evidence so far, however; is mixed and inconclusive (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009). Research in this area is beginning to turn not only to the effectiveness of different organizational forms, but also the social processes related to their emergence and legitimacy (King, Clemens, & Fry, 2011).

At the same time, the relationship with the market has been changing even for traditional public schools. First, schools have increasingly turned to private contractors to outsource functions such as food services, security, transportation, after-school programs, and tutoring (Burch, 2006). Second, philanthropic giving to schools has become influenced by market logics in which funding is increasingly tied to meeting funder-defined metrics and evaluations (Scott, 2009). This has meant a fundamental shift in the traditional relationship between philanthropies and schools, one that has led to more direct control over the core functions of the school through increased accountability, not unlike the discussion of standards and testing earlier.

TECHNOLOGY

At least since Thomas Edison told a newspaper reporter that the motion picture would make books in schools obsolete (Smith, 1913) people have predicted that technological innovations would revolutionize the organization of the school. That feeling is perhaps stronger today than ever, but the

organizational inertia of the school is strong and does not seem in danger of being altered anytime soon. There are two reasons that role of technology in school organization is so frequently discussed today. First, the world of work is becoming more technologically sophisticated and schools must prepare students to be able to work within such a world. For this reason, there are many calls for schools to more systematically train students in the use of technology, and especially students who may not have opportunities to learn at home (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010).

The second way that technology is implicated in the discussion of schools is the belief that innovations have the potential to revolutions the organization of schools in positive ways (Pitler, Hubbel, & Kuhn, 2012). This may entail the use of technological devices like tablets to individually tailored lessons (Tatar, Roschelle, Vahey, & Penuel, 2003) or, more radically, "flipping" the classroom such that technology allows students' first access to new information to happen outside the school (Bergmann & Sams, 2012). It remains to be seen what, if any, effect new technologies will have on school organization but historians have documented a long history of claims about technology revolutionizing school when in fact the general tendency has actually been for technology to be absorbed by the institution rather than transforming it (Cuban, 2003).

Moreover, it is not just that technology has the potential to impact organizational features of schools, those same organizational features shape how technology is adopted and implemented. Warschauer, Knobel, and Stone (2004), for example, found that due to less stable teaching and support staff, low-SES neighborhood schools were less likely to adopt and implement new technologies in the classroom. Beyond this, Warschauer and colleagues found that teachers in low-SES schools also had to deal with a more complex "instructional environment" because they taught more English language learners and at-risk students, students who generally had fewer computer experiences. In addition, they felt greater pressure in terms of test scores and policy mandates (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). One result of such differences in organizational environment is that teachers of low-SES students tend to use technology for basic, remedial tasks whereas teachers of high-SES students use those same technologies for more active and constructivist purposes (Becker, 2000).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS: PROCESSES AND INTEGRATING LEVELS

The social, cultural, and technological changes described earlier challenge some of our longstanding conceptualizations of schools as organizations (Rowan, 2006). Moreover, the study of organizations is itself undergoing a turn to focus more on dynamics and processes (Scott, 2004). In response to

both these real world and theoretical shifts we see the future of organizational analysis of schools as taking a more processual view of schools, one that pays significantly more attention to cross-level mechanisms. We argue below for a view of schools not as organizational "containers" within which teaching and learning occurs, but rather dynamic networks of interaction that constitute ongoing organizing processes (Leander, Phillips, & Taylor, 2010). We discuss possible ways to study such dynamic processes across each of the organizational levels discussed earlier.

First, we can add to existing studies of the relationship between the school and its environment by taking up Nelson and Winter's conceptualization of routines as the DNA of organizations (1982). From this perspective, we can see the selection, use, and discarding of classroom academic activities and other organizational routines as a major source of change in schools. At the global level, changes in activities and routines may come through policy changes or educational movements (Rury, 2009). At the local level, they may come through political or economic struggles or in response to changes in student or teacher compositions (Bidwell, 2001). Even more importantly, though, such a perspective allows us to focus not only on intentional reform efforts, which currently dominate organizational studies of schools, but also more evolutionary processes through which school structures and routines are selected or discarded on a wide scale without the need for the kind of explicit coordination that marks reform efforts.

The next step in a dynamic cross-level analysis would be to study how the adoption or alteration of activities shapes, and is shaped by, patterns of interaction. Traditionally, the study of school change has been undertaken either through large-scale surveys of implementation or through case studies of particular sites (Desimone, 2002). In short supply, then, are systematic comparative studies of the interrelation of activity structures and interactional patterns (Diehl & McFarland, 2012). There are numerous methods that can be used for such research, including discourse (Little, 2003), activity system (Roth & Lee, 2007), and network analysis (Penuel *et al.*, 2010). Moreover as alluded to earlier, such research approaches are necessary if we are to understand how broad changes in accountability, choice and technology actually influence processes of teaching and learning in the everyday lives of schools.

Along these same lines, we also need to better understand how such changes in interactional processes interrelate with what is perhaps the central purpose of schools—the transmission of knowledge. Little organizational work has examined the relationship between forms of instruction and their content. This is key because skillful students must simultaneously engage with the interactional form of academic activities as well as the cognitive structure and the content being taught. The goal in such work would be better to understand how the social organization of interaction

in classrooms and schools interrelates with the cognitive organization of academic content. That is, learning in schools is both an issue of collective social coordination and individual cognitive modification, yet little work studies their intersection.

Finally, we need to pay more attention to the broad socializing effects of schools (Bidwell, 2001). While existing work focuses on how students are socialized into the impersonal and bureaucratic structures of the school (including students' developing understanding of the nature of authority and how to conduct oneself as a client in a formal organization) there is little research examining how variation in school organization shapes students' behavior and experience in other settings. That is, we need to better understand how the socialization processes of schools transfers to nonschool situations. There are several possible mechanisms that need to be investigated: One is that, school socialization provides students with a sense of legitimacy of cultural products and symbols (Dreeben, 1968). A second is that, school socialization shapes a general conception of knowledge as well as a particular relationship to scientific knowledge (Driver *et al.*, 1994). A third is that, schools socialize students into the use of different hands-on techniques or intellectual habits (Keating, 1996). Whatever the mechanisms may be, there is much to be gained from a deeper understanding of how the organizational features of schools variably aid in socializing students into the moral and technical vision of their given communities and societies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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