**Effective Management of the Informal School Organization:
A Modest Proposal**

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses three leadership challenges associated with effective management of the informal school organization and offers practical suggestions to principals wishing to enhance this dimension of school operation. Working from the premise that informal organization is an outgrowth of bureaucratically oriented formal organization, effective management of an ever-present bureaucracy may hold the key to improving the effectiveness of informal school organization. Four bureaucratic components are examined for their impact and potential contribution in this regard--division of labor and specialization, impersonal orientation, hierarchy of authority, and rules and regulations. Suggestions for utilizing these components is intended to help principals develop the 'people dimension' of their schools and, in so doing, support them in their structural leadership role.

Managing today's schools is a challenging undertaking involving two interactive organizational dimensions identified by Getzels and Guba nearly sixty years ago, namely, people and structure. While much has been written about the centrality of structure to attainment of goals and fulfillment of educational plans (Knezevich, 1984; Hoy and Miskel, 2001), less attention has been paid to the fact that schools are also peopled organizations (Lippett, 1991; Hansen, 1991; Owens, 2004), suggesting that there is more to organizational structure than tangible lines of authority, superior-subordinate roles, rules and regulations, and other bureaucratic formalities. In fact there should be a flourishing informal organization present, capable of influencing both human and organizational goal attainment. For principals attempting to maximize their schools' effectiveness, enhancing the informal organizational presence requires serious leadership consideration (Owens, 1970). This paper identifies three challenges associated with this leadership exercise, and offers practical suggestions principals might consider for enhancing the informal organizational dimension of school operation.

As a starting point imagine that one has been tasked with examining and making recommendations for enhancing the informal organizational dimension of his/her school. An immediate challenge is where to find evidence of the presence of this phenomenon. Such becomes less of a challenge if one recalls that potential for informal organization resides within the formal organization (Knezevich,1984; Kimbrough and Nunnery,1988) and in the day-to-day groups of people within the school structure--for example,

teachers with the same planning period meeting in the staffroom to develop professional reports; administrators whose offices are in close proximity discussing school-related matters; and students meeting in small groups to share assignment ideas and interests. Since there are many such groups in a school and it is from these roots that informal organization derives, principals should endeavor to tap their potential as a source of informal organizational presence (French and Bell, 1990; Hoy and Miskel, 2001).

A second challenge arises when one queries which dimensions of formal organization contribute to this informal school dynamic. Silver (1983) posits that certain dimensions of formal structure (means) give rise to specific types of outcomes (ends) which impact not only the school organization per se but also those within. Since schools are assumed to be bureaucratic in nature, it is likely that specific components of bureaucracy serving as means actually contribute to defining, limiting, creating and/or modifying the invisible, often intangible informal school organization (Silver, 1983; Hoy & Miskel, 2008). These formal bureaucratic means will include division of labor and specialization, impersonal orientation, hierarchy of authority, along with rules and regulations.

For an already overworked administrator there is yet a further challenge--the need to examine various definitions of informal organization to better understand its critical components. A sampling of definitions is presented here, beginning with Simon (1957) who writes that informal organization refers to those interpersonal organizational relationships that impact the decisions made therein but are frequently omitted from the more formal scene. As Knezevich (1984) puts it, the informal organization grows out of interpersonal transactions deriving from the many clusters of informal influence groups having either a positive or negative impact on the formal organization itself. In fact, Owens (1987) believes these interactions to be prime determinants of the behavior of people in that organization, suggesting that from a school perspective both teacher and student performance is significantly impacted by the ever-present informal organization.

Kimbrough and Nunnery (1988) state that within a formal organization many interactions occur that are not planned; communication networks are built; ways of behaving are defined; and cliques emerge/disappear. Here the informal organization is portrayed in those human aspects of the enterprise not always described in organizational charts.

French and Bell (1990) view informal organization as beliefs and assumptions, perceptions, attitudes, feelings, values and group interactions deriving from the more formal dimensions of goals, technology, policy, products and resources. This definition falls in line with that proposed by Hoy and Miskel (2001) where they depict the informal organization as a system of interpersonal relations that forms spontaneously within all formal settings. It is the natural ordering and structuring that evolves from the needs of interacting participants.

Owens (2004) argues that the informal organization relates to relations between people in that organization. For this reason he refers to the informal organization as the 'human side' of an organization, revealing itself when one attempts to involve people

more fully in making decisions that affect them; attend to their emotional needs more adequately; and increase collegiality and collaboration through team effort.

Other definitions of informal organization (Hansen, 1991; Hoy and Miskel, 2008) closely follow those already described, namely, the interlocking social structures that govern how people work together in practice; the network of personal and social relationships that arise as people associate with others in a work environment; and aspects of organization undefined in the formal structure including human relationships, actual power versus formal power, communication and social networks.

From these definitions it becomes clear that school principals wanting to understand the critical elements of informal organization should focus attention on those interpersonal relationships emerging from the formal organization itself. These human aspects include beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, attributes, feelings and values associated with people's needs. Comprising this 'human side' of the school organization, these personal forces form the interlocking social structures governing how people work together, as well as networks of personal and social relationships, and other organizational aspects of the formal structure. Given that schools are bureaucratic in nature (Lane, Corwin and Monahan, 1967; Hoy and Miskel, 2008; Treslan, 2008), effectiveness of their informal organizations will hinge on the extent to which the ever present bureaucracy (implicit in formal organizations) is understood and effectively managed, more specifically these four bureaucratic components: division of labor and specialization, impersonal orientation, hierarchy of authority, and rules and regulations.

Division of Labor and Specialization

Schools like other organizations function by having certain "activities required for the purposes of the bureaucratically governed structure distributed in a fixed way as official duties" (Gerth and Mills, as cited in Hoy and Miskel, 2008, p. 90). Tasks such as teaching, leadership, supervision and decision making (to name but a few) are complex--too complex to be performed unilaterally. This results in a need to divide this labor among others in the school setting--teachers, vice-principals, principal and others. When observed through the specialized nature of schools this division of labor seemingly applies directly to teachers and administrators. Yet ways and means can be explored to capitalize on the decisional contributions of other stake holders, namely, students, parents and other external individuals/groups (Owens, 1987; French and Bell, 1990). In so doing, organizational specialization can be enriched through the knowledge and expertise contributed by those now engaged in these processes. Interestingly, division of labor and specialization can have a positive impact on school operation; yet, such is seldom the case simply because little time or attention is paid to this bureaucratic dimension (Hoy and Miskel, 2008).

What implications might a focus on division of labor and specialization have for the informal school organization? Schools harbor a vast untapped human potential comprised of talents, abilities, feelings and interactions (French and Bell, 1990; Hoy and Miskel, 2008). These are 'people' qualities, not elements of an organizational chart.

These intangibles are present in both those who administer the bureaucratic presence in schools and those who are governed by that presence. Consequently, tapping this potential can contribute to both school efficiency and effectiveness. But herein lurks a problem--too often we as administrators fail to recognize this talent pool at our doorstep. So it is not uncommon to find principals unaware, not necessarily unwilling, of the need to build on this human potential in their schools by developing outlets for this potential to be realized in daily school management. Examples of possible administrator action in this regard might include:

- reviewing standing school committee compositions to ensure the presence of students, parents, teachers and community where necessary (viz., school councils),
- encouraging collaborative input in critical administrative exercises such as decision making, assessment and leadership,
- revisiting the concepts of shared decision making, empowerment, and collegial management relative to stakeholder participation,
- redefining educational role responsibilities to include significant others in the current school community when necessary,
- facilitating understanding of bureaucracy and the individual's role therein, and
- developing a structural vehicle for facilitating staff and student decisional input (e.g., see Treslan, 1977).

Impersonal Orientation

It has long been believed that the reality of a functioning bureaucracy is provision of an impersonal orientation (Weber, as cited in Hoy and Miskel, 2008). However, when viewed in practical terms within organizations (schools included) this frequently translates into coldness, inapproachability, aloofness, and/or lack of feeling on the part of organizational constituents (French and Bell, 1990; Hoy and Miskel, 2008). Teachers, for example, are required to make decisions based on facts, not feelings, creating a 'stand off' atmosphere in many classrooms (Sergiovanni, 1999; Hoy and Miskel, 2008). Other school constituents are obliged to treat everyone alike when there are often goodly reasons for not doing so. For principals truly concerned with tapping the non bias and fairness of this bureaucratic dimension for the betterment of their schools' informal organization, there is a need to consider ways and means of transforming an often sterile environment in which people sometimes serve as 'non persons' into one of collaboration and cooperation. Possible administrator action here could include:

- recognizing teacher and student accomplishments via home-school communication,
- emphasizing fairness and objectivity based on relationships rather than selective decision making and rankings,
- emphasizing equality when dealing with all school stakeholders,
- encouraging activities designed to warm the classroom/school climate,
- viewing seemingly idle conversation as potential for valuable informal cooperation, and

- accepting that the very irrationality one tries to minimize can contribute to the foundation of effective informal organization.

Hierarchy of Authority

As with most organizations, schools are vertically structured, that is, each office/role within is arranged so that every lower office/role is under the control and supervision of a higher one (Owens, 1987; Hoy and Miskel, 2001). This gives rise to the hierarchy of authority displayed in standard organizational charts. The downside of this formal arrangement in schools is that teachers and students are located at the bottom of this 'pyramid--on the receiving end of orders and rarely having occasion to input ideas to the governance process'. While it might be argued that this hierarchy ensures superior-subordinate relations, it also guarantees disciplined compliance to superior-dictated directives (Lane et al.,1967). This in itself is detrimental to the morale and dignity of all who interact with the school organization, since the very core of informal organizational structure--individuals--are denied the basic ingredients of their participation--freedom, empowerment and trust (Owens, 1987; Hansen, 1991). To ensure that the hierarchy of authority in schools will enhance rather than detract from informal school organization, administrator action could include:

- minimizing coordination through order-giving,
- engaging stakeholders and encouraging their involvement regardless of their position in the decision making process,
- assisting all school members in overcoming their reluctance to communicate with perceived 'superiors',
- providing information sessions for all organizational members on how their school is 'really managed',
- making existing school structure more user-friendly, and
- helping stakeholders understand the meaning of individual-institutional interaction.

Rules and Regulations

Schools are notorious for their plethora of rules and regulations in which the "administration of law is held to consist in the application of these rules to particular cases" (Weber, as cited in Hoy and Miskel, 2008, p. 91). Those who work in schools can find several valued functions ideally served by rules and regulations: (1) they serve as explications of policy limiting options; (2) they are a form of communication; (3) they perform a screening function between superiors and subordinates; (4) they create public evaluation standards facilitating a remote control function; and (5) they provide a sense of legitimacy for punishing people.

However, teachers and administrators alike recognize the fallibility of rules and that this fallibility, while consequential to all stakeholders, is particularly detrimental to the informal school organization (Lane et al., 1967; Norton, 2005; Hoy and Miskel, 2008). Meant to function as general guides in specific situations, rules require interpretation. Rules by their very nature encounter organized resistance because both their meaning

and relevance depend on those applying them. Rules also contribute to the preservation of apathy because of their standards-establishing function, usually specifying a minimal level of performance. And herein lies a dilemma--while rules and regulations are designed to account for the routine and the typical, the world of reality is not entirely foreseeable. Thus rules violation is inevitable because of their nature, their place in the school organization, and the very nature of the school organization itself (Lane et al., 1967). Principals need to realize that because of the resistance and resentment rules create, overall effectiveness of the informal school organization can be reduced by proliferation of rules and regulations which potentially limit or constrain the informal organizational structure (Hoy and Miskel, 2008). In light of this information, administrators might undertake the following actions to facilitate effective rule and regulation development and deployment in their schools:

- creating a multi-stakeholder committee to review and/or draft new rules and regulations when needed,
- establishing a 'rules and regulations' school committee to vet all rules and regulations prior to implementation,
- ensuring that rules and regulations are genuinely fair and that there is a rational reason for their existence,
- ensuring that any departure from existing rules and regulations is handled in compliance with due process,
- examining the necessity for specific rules and regulations, and their impact on the informal school organization, and
- ascertaining the 'goodness of fit' between specific rules and regulations and school goals.

In summary, effectively managing an informal school organization is an important leadership responsibility for school principals (Owens, 1970; Lipham, Rankin and Hoeh, 1985). Doing so necessitates understanding of the close association between the more tangible formal organization and the less tangible, yet critical, informal organization (Owens, 1987; Knezevich, 1984). Armed with awareness of the role challenges identified in this paper and the bureaucratic path provided for maximizing the effectiveness of informal school organization, principals can truly embrace the Hoy and Miskel (2001) belief that since schools are 'peopled' organizations, there is undoubtedly the presence of an informal structure related to (interactive with) the formal school organization. This means that every effort should be made to facilitate these interactive forces within the school, and tap the consequential potential of this interaction for the benefit of the school as a whole. Suggestions advanced in this paper for doing so are aimed at assisting principals in enhancing that human side to every bureaucratic action and, in so doing, to minimize any dysfunctional nature imbedded in the four bureaucratic elements focused on. These suggestions represent practical considerations for busy principals interested in enhancing the 'people' dimension of their schools through awareness of the bureaucratic presence in school operation and an understanding that bureaucracy can be groomed to the advantage of the informal organization.

This will necessitate structural leadership on the part of principals which, according to Lipham, et al. (1985), includes taking immediate action on urgent decisions; exercising clear and decisive delegation; stressing outcomes; developing clear philosophy as a basis for decision making; monitoring; and maintaining positive relations with stakeholders. Emerging from these activities should be knowledge that effective management of informal school organization equates with those essential functions of informal structure proposed by Barnard, (as cited in Hoy and Miskel, 2001, p. 88), years ago–"an effective vehicle for communication; a means of developing cohesion; and a device for protecting the integrity of the individual". Hopefully, this paper might assist principals in achieving this understanding.

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