

## FOUR FACES OF EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS\*

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### ABSTRACT

This article attempts to explore the presumed distinctive character of educational organizations. This is done by explicating and proposing an integration of four organizational models. The models are called: the rational-, the political-, the social system-, and the anarchistic model, respectively. A basic assumption is that the models represent four complementary dimensions of organizations, rather than four mutually exclusive alternatives. A typology is outlined, indicating a set of conditions under which the four dimensions are assumed to be differently salient. In conclusion, it is argued that educational organizations may be conceived of as involving an interplay of four dimensions characterized by the keywords: truth (the rational dimension), trust (the social dimension), power (the political dimension), and foolishness (the anarchistic dimension).

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Although it is widely recognized that schools, at least in certain respects, exhibit unique organizational properties (Katz, 1964; Bidwell, 1965; Weick, 1976), there is no, or only a limited, consensus concerning the character of this uniqueness.

While the school according to certain authors is described as an orderly and rational bureaucracy, characterized by a hierarchical and coordinated structure (Bidwell, 1965; Shipman, 1968; Banks, 1976; Berg, 1981), others have focused their descriptions on the ambiguity (March and Olsen, 1976) and the foolishness (March, 1976) that are assumed to characterize the loosely coupled (Weick, 1976; Katz, 1964; Bidwell, 1965), and anarchic (Cohen et al., 1972) world of the school.

In addition, however, there is also a split between those portraying the

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school as a socio-cultural system held together by a network of informal interpersonal relations, shared goals, and a common organizational culture (Sarason, 1971; Alderfer and Brown, 1975; Ekholm, 1976), and those viewing the school as a political entity, characterized by conflicts, power struggles, and bargaining among interest groups and subunits as normal ingredients of organizational life (Baldrige, 1971; Isling, 1980; Sandkull, 1981). That is, there is a split between a consensus and a conflict view of educational organizations.

In what way then, if any, do schools have a distinctive organizational character? The purpose of this article is to explore this question. This is done, firstly, by explicating four organizational models corresponding to the four views of the school as an organization that were distinguished above. However, because each model emphasizes a different aspect of organizations, they may give, at best, only a partial understanding of the organizational character of the school. Therefore, an attempt is made to integrate the four organizational models into a more comprehensive framework. This is done, by conceptualizing the models as four different, although complementary dimensions of organizational reality. More specifically, a typology is proposed indicating a set of conditions under which the four organizational dimensions are assumed to be differently salient.

### **Four Organizational Models**

The notion of an organizational model refers to a set of assumptions, or a research orientation, concerning organizational reality. In other words, an organizational model has the character of a conceptual scheme, which can be used for descriptive and analytical purposes.

In the text below, four organizational models are described. The four models are called: the rational-, the political, the social system-, and the anarchistic model, respectively. For each of the models, the description will focus on the assumptions made concerning organizational processes. Matters concerning organizational structure and design are touched upon only in so far as they have clear implications for processual aspects of organizations.

#### **THE RATIONAL MODEL**

The rational model of organizations is conceptually tied to the assumption that organizations can be characterized in terms of a set of goals or preferences. Organizations are viewed as purposefully designed instruments (means) for the pursuit of the goals or the intentions of some dominant actor or coalition of actors (Gouldner, 1959; Allison, 1971; Georgiou, 1973; Abrahamsson, 1975). In accordance with this instrumental view, organizational action is assumed to be

an outcome of deliberate calculation and purposive choice on the part of some actor (Allison, 1971).

The rational model puts heavy demands on the formalization of organizational structure in the direction of clearly specified roles and procedures (Gouldner, 1959). Furthermore, it presupposes a set of clear and consistent goals; a certain consensus concerning the goals; and an explicit and well understood technology and knowledge base for the choice of activities (means) for the achievement of the shared goals (March and Simon, 1958; Thompson, 1967; Pfeffer, 1981).

As is, nowadays, generally accepted, the rational model has serious limitations both as a descriptive and as a normative model of organizational action (March and Simon, 1958; Lindblom, 1959; Georgiou, 1973; Benson, 1977). To a considerable extent, the criticism has focused on the presumptions of rationality made by the model. Several authors have noted the limitations on organizational rationality due either to limits on the cognitive capacity of the individual (March and Simon, 1958; Braybrooke and Lindblom, 1970; March, 1978), or to unfavorable organizational conditions (Cohen et al., 1972; March and Olsen, 1976).

However, in spite of the severe criticism that has been leveled against the rational model and its derivatives, its fundamental elements have, to a large extent, been retained as the predominant mode of organizational analysis (Georgiou, 1973; Benson, 1977). Assumptions consistent with the rational model have been applied to the organizational analysis of schools by, for example, Shipman (1968), Banks (1976), and, more recently, by Berg (1981).

#### THE POLITICAL MODEL

In many organizations, including schools, the heavy demands put on the organization by the rational model are probably far from being realized. Particularly in the case of schools, the diversity of interests and the lack of consistent and shared goals have been noticed (Baldrige, 1971; March and Olsen, 1976; Berg, 1981). Under these conditions, it has been hypothesized that organizations are best understood as political entities (March and Simon, 1958; Cyert and March, 1963; Pettigrew, 1973; Pfeffer, 1981). That is, as a system of interacting individuals and subgroups pursuing different interests, demands, and ideologies through the use of power and other resources.

Accordingly, the degree to which a certain actor succeeds in furthering his interests or ideology is assumed to be determined by the amounts of power and other resources that he is able to mobilize relative to competing actors (Pfeffer, 1981). Furthermore, it is hypothesized that analytical-rational modes of problem solving and conflict resolution are replaced by problem solving activities characterized by bargaining and compromise (March and Simon, 1958). Thus, in contrast to the rational model, the political model views conflict rather than consensus as a normal aspect of organizational life (Pfeffer, 1981).

Applications of a political model to the study of educational organizations are made by, for example, Baldrige (1971), Pfeffer and Salancik (1974), Isling (1980), and Sandkull (1981).

#### THE SOCIAL SYSTEM MODEL

The social system model can be described as an application of general systems theory to the study of organizations (Miller and Rice, 1967; Katz and Kahn, 1978).

In contrast both to the rational- and to the political model, the social system model views organizational processes as spontaneous, adaptive responses to internal or external demands, rather than as intentional action. Thus, while the former models emphasize intention, rationality and formal organization, the social system model emphasizes the emergent and unplanned properties that are assumed to characterize the informal organization (Gouldner, 1959; Abrahams-son, 1975).

Another characteristic of the social system model is its emphasis on integration and interdependence between system elements as a basic property of organizations. The base of this integration is assumed to be of a social psychological nature. More specifically, it comprises: roles, norms, and a cultural system of values, beliefs, and ideology (Katz and Kahn, 1978). That is, what is sometimes called organizational culture. Furthermore, the factors that are subsumed under the construct of organizational culture are considered as important determinants of organizational action (Katz and Kahn, 1978; French and Bell, 1978; Ekholm, 1976).

Outside the organization development (OD) movement (for example, Miles and Schmuck, 1971; Alderfer and Brown, 1975; Fullan et al., 1980), few attempts have been made to apply a social system model to the study of schools (for example, Katz, 1964; Gross et al., 1971; Richardson, 1973; Ekholm, 1976).

#### THE ANARCHISTIC MODEL

What is here called the anarchistic model is far less than the three models described above a coherent set of concepts or assumptions concerning organizations. Rather, the term is used here as a summary term covering a set of different concepts, propositions, and metaphors proposed by different authors.

In the text below, the anarchistic model is described using three of its most well-known notions as a point of departure. That is, the metaphors of organized anarchies (Cohen et al., 1972; Cohen and March, 1974), garbage cans (Cohen et al., 1972), and loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976), respectively.

### 1. *The Metaphor of Organized Anarchy*

As argued by Cohen et al. (1972), any organization, although particularly educational and public organizations, can, at least partly, be understood as an organized anarchy. This metaphor refers to organizations with three general characteristics (Cohen et al., 1972). Firstly, there are inconsistent and ill-defined goals and preferences. As stated by Cohen et al. (1972), such an organization: “discovers preferences through action more than it acts on the basis of preferences” (p. 1). Consequently, the intentionality of organizational action becomes problematic. Secondly, organizational processes and technology are unclear or poorly understood by the members of the organization. Thirdly, there is fluid and part-time participation. The members of the organization: “vary in the amount of time and effort they devote to different domains; involvement varies from one time to another” (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 1).

The three properties of organized anarchies mentioned above are characterized by March and Olsen (1976) as three kinds of organizational ambiguity. To these three properties March and Olsen (1976) add a fourth kind of ambiguity, namely, the ambiguity of history. That is, the tendency of organization members to selectively reconstruct and distort organizational events in the past. As observed by March and Olsen (1976): “What happened, why it happened, and whether it had to happen are all problematic” (p. 12).

### 2. *The Garbage Can Metaphor*

An important implication of the anarchic view of organizations is the assumed lack of intentionality of organizational action. This assumption is manifested in the garbage can model of organizational choice (Cohen et al., 1972).

According to this metaphorical notion, opportunities for organizational problem solving and choice are viewed as garbage cans into which various issues, problems, and solutions are dumped by the participants (Cohen et al., 1972). In contrast to traditional, analytical-rational conceptions of problem solving and decision making in organizations, these processes are not assumed to follow a rational and orderly sequence of phases, from identification and definition of problem to choice and implementation of solution. Rather, a decision is viewed as an outcome: “of several relatively independent streams within an organization” (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 2).

More specifically, organizational choice is viewed as an outcome of four such streams consisting of problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities. Thus, if the garbage can model is correct, organizational processes are, to a large extent, determined by accidental streams of events. The concepts of intention and goal are largely ignored, or given a problematic status as antecedents of organizational action. Instead, goals, plans, and policy statements are viewed as symbols, advertisements, games, or, simply, as excuses for interaction (Cohen and March, 1974).

### 3. *The Loosely Coupling Metaphor*

A basic assumption of the social system model as interpreted above is the idea of a fundamental integration and interdependence between the elements of an organization. This idea is strongly questioned by the anarchistic model. Instead, proponents of the latter model (Weick, 1976; 1979; March and Olsen, 1976) have described organizations, especially educational organizations, as loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976). According to this metaphor, the elements of an organization are only weakly connected to each other. As examples of such loose couplings within schools are mentioned: intention and action; processes and outcomes; administrators and teachers; teachers and teachers; teachers and pupils (Weick, 1976).

The loosely coupling metaphor is closely allied to what March and Simon (1958) call an empty world. That is, a world: "in which most events are unrelated to most other events; causal connections are exceptional and not common" (p. 176). It also has strong affinities with the notion of structural looseness (Bidwell, 1965), and what Katz (1964) calls the autonomy structure of schools.

As should be clear from the brief presentation of the anarchistic model given above, this model, in contrast to the other three models presented in this section, is based primarily on data from educational settings (cf. Cohen and March, 1974; March and Olsen, 1976). Thus, in the search for a model of the school as an organization, the anarchistic model should be considered as a qualified candidate.

### **Toward an Integrative Model – Truth, Trust, Power, and Foolishness in Educational Organizations**

Each of the four organizational models described above emphasize different aspects of organizational reality. That is, each model emphasizes certain variables, while others are deemphasized or ignored. Consequently, each model can be expected to give only a partial understanding of the organizational reality. Given this line of reasoning, the point could be made that it might be possible to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of organizations by integrating the four models into an overarching framework (cf. Allison, 1971). Efforts toward such a reconciliation of different organizational models are made by, for example, Allison (1971), Olsen (1976), and Pusey (1976). In the remainder of this article, some outlines of an integrative model of educational organizations are proposed.

A basic assumption of the proposed integrative model is the idea of complementarity between the four models of organizations described above. That is, the models are viewed as compatible, rather than as mutually exclusive alternatives. More specifically, the notion of complementarity as interpreted here

means that the four models represent four dimensions of the same organizational reality. Thus, according to this view, organizations are assumed to be characterized by a rational-, a political-, a social system-, and an anarchistic dimension, respectively. Of course, this dimensional view of organizations does not imply that all four dimensions are equally salient in any organization, all of the time. On the contrary, it is assumed that different dimensions may be differently salient in different kinds of organizations (for example, schools and industrial organizations), in different parts or subsystems of the same organization, or even in the same subsystem at different points in time. In the text below, a set of conditions is proposed under which each of the four organizational dimensions is assumed to be particularly conspicuous.

The proposed conditions are specified along two dimensions: (a) the degree of clarity and consensus concerning organizational goals and preferences; (b) the level of ambiguity concerning technology and organizational processes.

The first of these two dimensions concerns the extent to which the goals and preferences of an organization are clear, consistent, and shared by the members of the organization. Two extreme values are distinguished within this dimension: the case of clearly stated and shared goals (the consensus condition) is distinguished from the case where the goals are unclear and/or disagreed upon (the conflict condition). The second dimension concerns the degree to which the technology and the organizational processes are clear and well understood by the organizational members. Also this dimension is dichotomized: clear technolo-

TABLE I

A Typology of Four Organizational Models

		(a) Organizational Goals and Preferences	
		Clear and shared (consensus)	Unclear and/or disagreed upon (conflict)
(b) Organizational Processes/Technology	Transparent/Clear	The Rational Model Keywords: Truth, Thinking, Task-orientation	The Political Model Keywords: Power, Conflict, Struggle
	Ambiguous/Unclear	The Social System Model Keywords: Trust, Learning, Collaboration	The Anarchistic Model Keywords: Foolishness, Randomness, Play

gies and transparent processes are distinguished from unclear technologies and ambiguous organizational processes.

Taken together, the two dimensions described above produce a fourfold table that can be used to classify the four organizational dimensions, or, viewed in another light, the four models of organizations, distinguished in this article. The resulting typology, which is an elaboration of the well-known classification of decision issues advanced by Thompson (1967), is presented in Table I.

As is clear from Table I, each of the four cells of the typology represents a different model of organizations. In order to summarize the main theoretical emphasis of the four models, each model is characterized by a set of keywords. Furthermore, a set of conditions is indicated under which each of the models is most likely to apply; or, as interpreted in dimensional terms, under which different organizational dimensions are assumed to be differently salient.

Consider, first, a situation characterized by clear and shared goals (the consensus condition), a clear technology, and organizational processes that are well understood by the members of the organization. Under these conditions, the rational model is assumed to be adequate both as a descriptive and as a normative model of organizational action. Due to its emphasis on cognitive and instrumental aspects of organizations, the rational model is characterized by the keywords: truth, thinking, and task orientation.

If there is a consensus concerning goals, but the technology and the organizational processes are ambiguous, for example, because the consequences of organizational action are largely unknown or only dimly recognized, it is assumed that social factors like norms, ideologies, and traditions will play an important role as determinants of organizational action. Furthermore, it can be assumed that organizational activities, to a large extent, will be guided by organizational learning based on trial-and-error procedures and feedback from previous actions, rather than by deliberate calculation. Thus, under these conditions the social system model is most likely to provide an adequate framework for understanding organizational processes. In order to underline its emphasis on interpersonal relationships and organizational culture as determinants of organizational action, the social system model is characterized by the keywords: trust, learning, and collaboration.

When goals are unclear, inconsistent, or disagreed upon by the members of the organization (the conflict condition), political processes are assumed to take precedence over analytical-rational behavior (March and Simon, 1958). Given these conditions, it is presumed that organizations are best understood according to a political model. In order to indicate some of the important determinants of organizational processes according to this model, it is characterized by the keywords: power, conflict, and struggle.

Finally, when there are unclear or conflicting goals, together with ambiguity concerning technology and organizational processes, the situation comes



close to the one that is presupposed by the anarchistic model of organizations. The garbage can logic that is assumed to characterize organizational processes under these conditions can be indicated by the keywords: foolishness, randomness, and play.

The typology of organizational models presented above (see Table I) is an attempt to integrate what is assumed to be four significant dimensions or faces of organizational life. Using some of the keywords given above, the profiles of the four faces can be characterized by the words: truth, trust, power, and foolishness. Of course, these dimensions are important not only to organizational life, but to life itself.

### Conclusion

The intent of this article was to explore the presumed distinctive character of educational organizations. As a first step in exploring this issue, four models of organizations were distinguished. However, instead of arguing that one or the other of these models gives the most adequate understanding of the school as an organization, an integrative model was suggested. According to this integrative view, schools are assumed to involve elements that are consistent with all four of the organizational models distinguished in this article. Thus, rather than viewing the four models as mutually exclusive alternatives, they are conceived of here as representing different, although complementary dimensions of the organizational reality of schools. However, this dimensional view of organizations does not imply that all four of the dimensions distinguished here are equally applicable to any organization, at any point in time. On the contrary, the typology outlined in the previous section indicates a set of conditions under which different organizational dimensions are assumed to be differently salient. Thus, like many other phenomena, educational organizations are assumed to show a different face under different circumstances.

If this situationistic view of organizational life is accepted, the question whether schools have a distinctive organizational character becomes equivalent to asking whether life in schools takes place under conditions that are radically different from the conditions of life that characterize other kinds of organizations. As argued by several authors (e.g., Weick, 1976, 1979; Cohen et al., 1972; Cohen and March, 1974; March and Olsen, 1976), schools are essentially, anarchic in character. The presumed anarchic character of schools is viewed as contingent upon the confusing and turbulent world that they are assumed to confront. Thus, under these conditions, the anarchistic model of organizational life may, to paraphrase Olsen (1976), although normatively illegitimate, be descriptively adequate. Conversely, the rational model may, under similar conditions, although normatively attractive, be descriptively inadequate.

The point made by the present author, however, is that a model of educational organizations, in order to be both normatively legitimate and descriptively adequate, may be conceived of as involving an interplay and, ideally, an integration of truth (the rational dimension), trust (the social dimension), power (the political dimension), and foolishness (the anarchistic dimension). Perhaps, a convergence of these dimensions is what characterizes a truly rational organization (cf. Pusey, 1976; March, 1981). The question is, however, if such an integration is attainable, and, if so, under what conditions. Of course, this question is empirical in nature. Although the integrative model outlined in this article cannot provide an answer to this question, it implies a set of hypotheses which are amenable both to further conceptual development, and to empirical test. In addition, the proposed framework may indicate a possible, but hitherto largely neglected, way of understanding the presumed distinctive character of educational organizations.

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