
Management of Semi-Public Organizations in Complex Environments

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Abstract

Management activities in schools are unique compared to those of managers in other public organizations because of the character of schools as public service as well as publicly-funded organizations where high degrees of organizational autonomy and external penetration are both expected and required. There are rich discussions of various relationships between managerial activity and organizational context. And, while these discussions are not unique to the educational literature, special attention has been given to the association of managerial activities with organizational outputs of schools. There has, however, not been much attention to the effect the semi-public nature of schools has on school management. In keeping with the theme of this symposium issue of Public Administration and Management: An Interactive Journal, this paper addresses school management and the nature or influence of the public context on management activities in schools.

The Management of Schools as Semi-Public Organizations

The bureaucratic administration of formal organizations is an important and much discussed phenomenon (Weber 1946; March 1965; Silverman 1971; Meyer, Scott, Strang, & Creighton 1988; DiMaggio & Powell 1991). Therefore, how white-collar bureaucratic organizations are managed is and has historically been of particular sociological as well as administrative interest. As a result, prescriptions for administrative as well as managerial activity are widely debated and discussed in both the organizations and management literatures (Sayles 1964; Hales 1986; Stewart 1989; Noordegraaf & Stewart 2000). Compared to the activities of managers in other organizations, management activities in semi-public organizations, in particular, are unique (1) because of their character as public service as well as publicly-financed organizations where high degrees of organizational autonomy and external penetration are both expected and required and (2) because of their institutionalization across organizational environments (Weick 1976; Meyer & Scott 1983; Ingersoll 1993).

First, semi-public organizations are those organizations that are governed and financed either in part or wholly by the public meaning that the general public often feels that it has a vested interest in the governance and implementation of schooling. These organizations are frequently governed by local political bodies and expected to be highly responsive to the

requests and suggestions of the constituents of these political bodies. As a result of these various constituents, decision-making and other rational processes are often complicated.

Although there are many organizations that are semi-public, public schools are unique in that they are permeable to a higher degree than other semi-public organizations. This high degree of permeability results from a combination of factors. The general public is in most nations and states compelled to attend school at least through the end of primary school and through secondary school in most developed nations. Therefore, the public has had an intimate connection to schools throughout much of their lives, and often the most impressionable years of their lives. As a result, the public believes that it knows what schools do and should do. This long-term public exposure and involvement coupled with the consequent feeling of familiarity and entitlement that this exposure and involvement cultivates means that the public is comfortable discussing schools and has an opinion on most matters related to schooling, even if their opinions are not informed by the most relevant facts.

Another aspect of public schools that makes them especially permeable to public involvement and pressure is the fact that they are largely governed and financed by the public through political bodies at various levels of governance. For instance, at the national or federal level in most nations there is a Ministry or Department of Education that is responsible for national policy on education and often funds part if not all of the educational activities and schooling that occur in a nation. Depending on the particular nation, public governance at subordinate or more localized levels occurs as well. For instance, at the state or regional level in many nations, educational policy is further refined or created, which is unique to that state or region. In addition, local regions through their own budgets often fund much of the schooling that occurs within their jurisdiction. Finally, at the local level there is often a local community governing board that makes policy implementation decisions as well as further refining educational policy from the regional and national levels. These local governing boards also make decisions regarding the use of funds and the collection of new funds for educational purposes. At each of these governance levels, the funds that are allocated to schools find their origins in publicly administered taxes or other public sources. Therefore, the public itself has a vested interest in the governance and implementation of schooling because it governs and funds schooling, be it directly or indirectly.

Secondly, semi-public organizations are often institutionalized across organizational environments meaning that the formal structure and policies related to these organizations cross traditional contextual boundaries demarcated by regions ranging from local communities to regional districts to nation-states. As a result, the contextual boundaries of semi-public organizations are frequently undefined or only vaguely defined. This means that it is difficult to talk about where contextual influences on the managers of semi-public organizations begin and end. And, in fact, previous studies have not considered the influence that the complexity of public organizational contexts has on managers' activities. The problem of broad and ambiguous definitions of organizational contexts is also significant because "environment" is a key concept of organizational and administrative theory related to managerial activity. And, although some previous empirical studies do estimate relationships between management activities and individual elements of semi-public organizations' immediate contexts (Leithwood & Duke, 1999), researchers have yet to

determine how these managers adjust their activities in complex contexts comprising many different and even conflicting elements. In other words, the problem is that no one has yet estimated management activities based on the complexity of institutionalized organizational contexts, especially at the national and cross-national levels.

Even though levels of organizational governance, finance, and public familiarity vary by both organization and national system, public schools are ideal for the examination of the relationship between managerial activity and organizational environments. They are ideal because principals must manage their schools according to local school community contexts and immediate needs, while also considering and responding to national educational goals, trends, and expectations for schooling. Therefore, what principals do may be a response to school level needs, nation level expectations, or both. Each of these levels of needs and expectations may be called an organizational environment and at each level, varying levels of complexity characterize these organizational environments (Meyer & Associates 1978; Meyer & Scott 1983).

Managerial Work in Semi-Public Organizations

The most obvious and important question when defining the nature of managerial work in semi-public organizations is to ask who is a manager (Grey 1999; Mintzberg 1980). Stewart (1996, p. 3101) suggests that the two simplest definitions are that (1) managers are anyone responsible for the work of others and (2) managers are those above a certain level in the hierarchy of supervision. Yet even these definitions may not be appropriate given that one important managerial activity is to delegate responsibility and authority. As a result, managerial activity according to Stewart's definition becomes ambiguous as it is diffused throughout the hierarchy of organizational supervision. This ambiguity and diffusion arises because managers pass their responsibility and authority to others who perform many seemingly managerial tasks (Grey, 1999). In other words, as managers delegate responsibility and authority, activities that may be characteristically 'managerial' may not belong to or be performed by managers exclusively (Hales 1994; Noordegraaf & Stewart 2000, p. 433). Therefore, the nature of managerial work causes a fundamental problem in identifying managerial activity in semi-public organizations.

A second important conceptual consideration is that different fields define managers and their activity differently (Noordegraaf & Stewart 2000, p. 436). The context of management varies considerably, according to Stewart (1996, p. 3100), over time and among people in similar positions both within as well as across nations and organizations. Noordegraaf & Stewart (2000, p. 436) argue similarly that the perceptions of what managerial activity entails vary across fields within the already amorphous contextual environments of managerial activity. Of course, the obvious distinctions between the broader fields such as business, economics, sociology, political science, and education, for example, may be made, but even finer distinctions, definitions, and perceptions of managerial activity are possible. For instance, even public administration and organizational activity scholars have different conceptions of managerial activity (Noordegraaf & Stewart 2000, p. 436).

Consequently, a third and more important consideration for this study is the conceptual distinction between public and private sector management and even the distinction within the public sector between the political and the social services spheres (e.g., Lau, Pavett, &

Newman 1980; Harrow & Willcocks 1990; Smith 1995; Forssell & Jansson 1996; Noordegraaf & Stewart 2000). As Hannaway (1989) and others (Mintzberg 1980; Noordegraaf & Stewart 2000, p. 435) suggest, education and schooling contexts provide situations where the activity of managers is semi-public. On the one hand is the frequent push by, for example, educational stakeholders, researchers and practitioners for the corporate model of management in schools (Duffy 1996, 1997). Yet as Noordegraaf and Stewart (2000, p. 440) point out, “As traditional public sector values—such as representativeness, equality before the law, justice—are forced to compete with modern managerial values—such as economy, efficiency, effectiveness—inevitable tensions arise.” These tensions are what may give rise to a loose relationship (i.e., loose coupling) or even a broken relationship (i.e., decoupling) between managerial activity and organizational environments, especially at the national level. These tensions also suggest how the environmental complexity of schools may influence principals’ management activity and encourage it to couple differently with the organizational environment at different organizational levels.

Thus the conceptual considerations when defining managerial activity in semi-public organizations, and school principals’ management activity in particular, are dominated by (1) the ambiguity of what constitutes managers’ work or activities in these organizations, (2) the perception or relative context both of the managers and those observing or studying managerial activity, and (3) the semi-public and, consequently, tension-producing characteristics, responsibilities, and pressures of public school managers such as principals.

Management Activity

The nature of managerial work is slippery (Hannaway, 1989). And those who empirically approach management studies recognize the malleability of managerial activity even though less empirical and more policy-oriented studies do not. Noordegraaf and Stewart (2000) argue that managerial activity is oriented more toward systemic and sectorial concerns than specific problems or regions, although “extensive local knowledge” cannot and should not be discounted. They assert that “management skills are...less specific to particular problems, and more restricted to specific organizations and industrial sectors; deal with a succession of tasks in one system, rather than a series of discrete tasks occurring in separate locations; rest on a broad, diffuse knowledge base which includes extensive local knowledge” (Noordegraaf & Stewart, 2000, p. 434). Given this study’s focus on managerial activity, this is a powerful assertion. Therefore, according to Noordegraaf and Stewart (2000, p. 434), principals’ managerial activity is not specific to particular problems of instruction and learning within individual schools, but is restricted to the concerns and situations of types of schools and schooling.

This concept of principals’ managerial activity also suggests that while extensive local knowledge, which may include familiarity with the community and local external as well as internal school culture, is included as a part of the rationale or considerations of principals, their activity is based in a set of broad and diffuse core beliefs about the managerial activity of principals. Noordegraaf and Stewart (2000, p. 427) conclude that the institutional embeddedness of managerial activity deserves attention, especially for managerial activity occurring in the public sector. This is an encouraging assertion given that this study both investigates public sector managerial activity by focusing on school principals and

considers both the organizations and administrative approaches to principals' managerial activity.

Although other work focuses on the organizational embeddedness of managerial activity (i.e., managerial role in terms of the manager's systematic tasks; Noordegraaf & Stewart, 2000, pp. 431, 435; Sayles, 1964), each of these examples and assertions discussed above, punctuated by Noordegraaf and Stewart's conclusion suggests that the nature of managerial activity goes beyond the specific organizations in which managers are situated to encompass fields of organizations or ranges of organizations whose structures and purposes have been synthesized and scripted as part of an institutionalization process. This institutionalization of schooling structures, processes, and, in particular, principals' managerial activity suggests both the expansion of organizational boundaries and the importance of national systems in the study of institutionalized organizations such as schools.

Consequently, previous research has struggled with defining and measuring managerial activity in semi-public organizations. Although managerial activity has been defined in many ways which vary significantly depending on the managerial context or perspective of researchers and participants (for examples see Grant, Katkovsky, & Bray 1967; Dunnette, Campbell, & Helervik 1968; Campbell, Dunnette, Lawler, & Weick 1970; Koontz 1972; Hannaway 1985; Whitley 1988), the various elements of managerial activity in semi-public organizations may be divided for reasons of identification and convenience into two sets of considerations: technical management activity and legitimacy management activity.

The Institutionalization of Semi-Public Organizations

As Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue, many organizations become structured by their environments and isomorphically change with them. Of particular interest to administrators and policymakers, therefore, is the probability that structure and substance, which insinuates itself among semi-public organizations, disseminates through managers' activity. Rather than any sort of technical exchange between managers and those they manage via managers' activity and the consequences of their activity, managers' activities often reflect organizational models applied to and shaped by environmental contexts at both the local and national levels.

The significance of environmental contexts is that legitimate managerial activities depend on the institutional models developed by each type of organizational system. In particular, principals' management activities, therefore, vary depending on the national characteristics of schools' organizational environments (Wiseman, 2001), which are determined in part by cross-nationally institutionalized models of legitimate principals' management activity and in part by the penetration of school management hierarchies and systems by environmental conditions (Rowan, 1982).

Regardless of the relationship between a manager's activity and an organization's local environment, centralization of decision-making at the national level may determine a manager's ability or opportunity to contextualize their activity (Stevenson & Baker, 1991). As a result, management activity is caught between local environmental pressures and national environmental pressures. So, managers of semi-public organizations respond to (1)

pressures at the system level for legitimacy and (2) pressures from the local level for accommodation. How managers respond to these discrepant pressures, unfortunately, is not answered or estimated in the literature.

While some of the activity of these managers surely follows technical-rational, bureaucratic models, the more organizational and institutional elements of managerial activity are frequently described as agency-less “actions” performed in accordance with legitimate, scripted models of activity (Brignall & Modell, 2000). Yet to deny that these models exist and that managers behave in a manner appropriate to maintaining not only their individual legitimacy but also the legitimacy of their organizations in both local and national contexts would be to deny the influence of organizational environment. In fact, what drives much of managers’ actions is their attention to and need for legitimacy at both the local and national levels. Yet what constitutes legitimate activity at the local level may not and often does not correspond to what constitutes legitimate activity at the national level. In fact, while certain organizational outputs may be desired at both levels, the process or method of achieving these outputs may vary significantly. This is not to say that technical output is not part of the environmental mix for schools or is not a concern of managers. Instead, a loosely coupled model suggests that many other objectives occupy managers’ time and efforts, and these are often institutional requirements from the outside (Meyer & Scott 1983).

Thus, for example, the popular conception is that highly consistent or stable loci of organizational governance can simplify the external environment of schools. Using schooling as an example, in highly centralized school systems, principal management may require fewer legitimizing activities because so many of the institutional demands on schools are met at a governance level above the school. An example of this would be a nationally centralized curriculum. Political and technical conflict over the nature of such a curriculum would more likely occur at more centralized or national level arenas than at the local school level. In this case principals would not have to do the work of developing and legitimating a curriculum with both the local community and other levels of school administration. Instead, their job would be to technically assist faculty in implementing this curriculum. Whereas, in a school system in which there was discrepancy about which bureaucratic level of governance had control over the curriculum, the environment of schooling and principals’ management activity would be much more complex due to competing efforts to govern the schools from both the local and national levels of administration. This kind of reasoning about the centralization of organizational bureaucracies and management activity leads to several propositions:

Proposition 1: In organizational environments with less centralized decision-making bureaucracies, managers of semi-public organizations spend more time managing legitimacy issues and less time managing the technical processes of their organizations.

Proposition 2: In organizational environments with more centralized decision-making bureaucracies, managers of semi-public organizations spend less time managing legitimacy issues and more time managing the technical processes of their organizations.

In other words, management activity may be directed more towards legitimacy than technical process management depending on the penetration of regional or national level governance into local governing bodies. This means that organizations with fewer

institutional requirements and public penetration can be more overtly accommodating to local community and cultural influences. In turn, managers of semi-public organizations in decentralized systems vary their activity more by the particular demands of their communities and clients than models of legitimate activity imposed or expected by their external governing bodies. Therefore, system or organization level inputs and resources may influence the categorical performance and production of managers, but penetration of local culture and community influences can particularize performance and activity of managers as well. As Table 1 shows, a balance between the technical organizational processes and organizational legitimacy influences may be achieved or attempted although the environments in which each is a significant predictor of managerial activity may differ: management of technical processes dominating less complex environments and legitimacy management dominating the more complex environments.

Environmental Complexity

The complexity of organizational environment has been previously defined as an increase in the number of stakeholders or other influences penetrating organizations' daily functions and administrative duties. Another previous definition of organizational complexity has been the decentralization of administrative or organizational processes and functions, meaning that centralized institutions are supposedly less complex than their decentralized partners (Wiseman et al, 2000). As a result, American schools are labeled the most complex of any system in the world because of the extreme decentralization of school governance and administration in the United States. More recent analyses, however, suggest that complexity is not as simple as that. In a recent analysis of decentralization of school policy and curricula (Astiz et al, 2002), suggests that complexity occurs when there is a mixing of centralization levels within the same organization. In other words, semi-public organizations that attempt to centralize decision-making within nations, but simultaneously attempt to decentralize responsibility or accountability for the technical processes of schooling at the local level are the most complex. Similarly, systems that are either relatively all decentralized or all centralized are less complex because the operating system is coherent and consistent to some degree. It is when conflict arises within the administration or governance of an organization that complexity rises dramatically.

Table 1. Hypothesized relationships between semi-public organizations' environmental complexity and management activity.

	Predominantly (de)centralized loci of organizational governance (less complex organizational environment)	Mixed loci of organizational governance (more complex organizational environment)
Management of technical organizational processes (such as instruction in schools)	Yes	No
Management of organizational legitimacy (such as organizational image and stakeholder penetration)	No	Yes

Loose Coupling in Semi-Public Organizations

The relationship or association of managerial activity to the organization as well as the organization's environment is the focus of loose-coupling arguments. In characterizing loose coupling, Weick (1983, p. 44) argues that "coupled events are responsive, but that each event also preserves its own identity and some evidence of its physical or logical separateness." And as Ingersoll (1993, p. 86) asserts, schools embody the stereotypical characteristics of loosely coupled organizations such as: (1) unclear, diverse or ambiguous organizational means and goals; (2) low levels of coordination of employees' productive activities; (3) low levels of organizational control; (4) high levels of employee autonomy; and (5) low levels of managerial authority. Yet, coupling can occur both within and between organizational levels.

Furthermore, Weick (1983) citing the influences of Glassman (1973), Heider (1959), and Salancik (1975) suggests seven characteristics of loosely coupled systems, which can be in turn translated into both local and national level phenomena. These seven characteristics (Weick 1983, pp. 48-51) are that: (1) loose coupling allows the persistence of some parts of organizations because organizations then do not have to respond to every environmental change, (2) loose coupling provides a sensitive sensing mechanism for adjustment to local environmental influences, (3) loosely coupled systems are good for localized adaptation, (4) loosely coupled systems can change more and have more unique solutions than tightly coupled systems, (5) breakdowns in one part of a loosely coupled system are isolated and not allowed to spread to other parts of the organization, (6) loosely coupled systems allow more self-determination by the actors, and (7) loosely coupled systems are less expensive than tightly coupled systems because they do not coordinate people as much as tightly coupled systems. As school managers tailor their activity to the specific needs of schools' local environments and managerial pressure from the national educational system increases (i.e., these predictors increase or combine), the complexity of the school managers'

organizational environment should rise as well. In other words, the more complex schools' organizational environments are within national educational systems, the more loosely coupled the managerial activity of principals' should be to the school and national environments.

Sensitivity to organizational environments changes between types of organizations or by organizational sector (Davis & Powell 1990). In particular, environmental influence can differ between for-profit and non-profit organizations. Hannaway (1989) as well as Lau, Pavett, and Newman (1980) argue that too much has been made of the difference between public and private organizations. In particular, Hannaway (1989, p. xi) suggests that "administrative systems that are part of an organization producing goods for market exchange may behave differently at some levels, although perhaps not quite so differently at others." Hannaway (1989, p. xi) continues by asserting that the evidence she finds "suggests that the similarity in administrative systems across [public and private] organizations—at least at the levels discussed here—are probably greater than the differences. These are bold assertions, which may suggest that there are institutionalized models for managerial activity regardless of organizational sector and environmental influence. These assertions, therefore, suggest a more institutional approach to school management activity than even the organizational literature typically suggests.

Across the many kinds of schools and educational environments that exist, there are often consistently similar pressures on principals to behave in certain ways and perform certain duties. In addition, principals find themselves either looking to legitimate models of school management or being taught to be effective school managers in formally accredited and scripted-for-legitimacy professional training programs. In other words, the mechanisms of institutional change, which according to DiMaggio and Powell (1983) consist of coercive, mimetic, and normative influences, may lead principals to follow transnationally institutionalized scripts for principals' activity (i.e., models of legitimate school management activity).

Following established, rationalized scripts ensures principals' legitimacy even though some activities may decouple from the legitimate model of school management activity depending on the specific school environments (Weick 1976). This means that the activities of principals are sometimes torn between the rationalized, transnational models of legitimate school structures, processes, and outcomes and the characteristics and needs of principals' school environments. Consequently, when considering school management activities, one might expect that they would become increasingly standardized and stable over time due to institutional pressure resulting from the expanding legitimacy of mass education (Meyer, Ramirez, Robinson, & Boli-Bennett 1977; Meyer, Ramirez, & Soysal 1992).

Ogawa and Bossert (1995) argue that principals' managerial activity is an organizational quality and as such enhances an organization's social legitimacy, finds strength in a network of roles throughout the educational institution, relies on individuals' resources, and leads to the adoption of structures that mirror an organization's cultural environment. By situating principals as school managers in the midst of complex, semi-public organizations such as schools, this literature questions the linkage between school management activity and either school output or organizational environment, and suggests that if school management activity and school output are related, it is because the

relationship connects organizational and institutional level environmental influences (e.g., local and national environment) to individual level processes and outcomes (e.g., principal, teacher, and student performance).

School management activity may be predicted by organizational elements to which principals may contribute, but which are not dependent upon or significantly related to their activity. Instead, school level decisions and changes follow legitimate, rationalized models in part to ensure the growth and legitimacy of the organization in spite of (rather than because of) individual level outcomes such as student achievement (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995). It is more appropriate to look at organizational and institutional level characteristics that correspond with individual level outcomes independent of school management activity than to use school management activity to predict individual level outcomes. This perspective suggests that principals' individual resources and decision-making authority are not as influential on school output as the institutionalized model or environmental context in which their activities occur and to which they conform.

Consequently, the semi-public school environment or type of educational system in which students and principals work may be more predictive of the organizational output of schools such as school management activities than any proposed link between school management activities and school output. Of particular interest to educational administrators and policymakers, therefore, is the probability that structure and substance, which insinuates itself among school organizations, disseminates through school management activity. Rather than any sort of technical exchange between principals and students via school management activity and the consequences of this activity, a principals' management of instruction, for example, reflects organizational models applied to and shaped by semi-public environmental contexts at both the local and national levels.

The significance of semi-public environmental contexts is that legitimate management activities depend on the institutional models developed by each type of education system. School management activity should, therefore, vary depending on the national characteristics of schools' semi-public organizational environments. Variation in activity that is contextualized to specific school conditions and communities should also be more influential than activities that follow a strictly standardized model, which limits administrative and managerial authority. However, these school-specific conditions are nested in the larger national context determined in part by cross-nationally institutionalized models of legitimate school management activity and in part by the penetration of school management hierarchies and systems by environmental conditions (Rowan, 1982).

Regardless of the relationship between school management activity and schools' local environments, centralization of decision-making at the national level may determine principals' ability or opportunity to contextualize management within their schools (Stevenson & Baker, 1991). The same institutional influences that contribute to the training, education, and activity of school managers like principals as rationalized and legitimate models of school administration are products of the environment and preexisting levels of school performance at least as much as they are causes of it. Therefore, principals' management of both material and personnel resources is not as influential as the environment or context, which preexists schooling processes and permeates most aspects

of schooling students receive. As a result, school management activity is caught between local school environmental pressures and national environmental pressures.

Unanswered Questions

If and how school managers respond to semi-public environmental complexity within and between levels of formal school organization remains unanswered. The unique character of national organizational environments and their influences on what school managers do is less frequently studied. Also, the complexity of environments both within and between organizational levels is undefined and un-estimated. Most noticeably, however, are arguments that recognize the institutional isomorphism of school organizations while still allowing for variation within and between schools' organizational environments and the initiatives of school managers like principals. These questions lead to the need for an updated and elaborated perspective.

DiMaggio and Powell (1991) observe that while "functional explanations of the ways in which institutions represent efficient solutions to problems of governance" are frequent, "sociologists reject functional explanations and focus instead on the ways in which institutions complicate and constitute the paths by which solutions are sought." In other words, change occurs through institutions, and institutional influence is perhaps the most significant change agent among the plethora of contextual, environmental, and individual level influences contributing to each occurrence of change in society.

DiMaggio and Powell (1991, p.1) assert (p. 1) that "'institutionalists' vary in their relative emphasis on micro and macro features, in their weightings of cognitive and normative aspects of institutions, and in the importance they attribute to interests and relational networks in the creation and diffusion of institutions." Consequently, an exploration of new institutional theory emphasizes the distinction between technical and institutional environments. One of the clearest explanations of this distinction comes from Scott and Meyer (1991, p. 123) as they define each. Scott and Meyer (1991, p. 123) assert that "technical environments are those in which a product or service is produced and exchanged in a market such that organizations are rewarded for effective and efficient control of their production systems." This technical environment is remarkably similar to the accountability environments for principals emphasized by the educational and business administration approaches to managerial activity. On the other hand, "institutional environments are, by definition, those characterized by the elaboration of rules and requirements to which individual organizations must conform if they are to receive support and legitimacy." Thus, outcomes of organizations (such as school performance or student achievement) and individual participation in organizations (such as principals' instructional management activity) are not necessarily as important in an institutional environment as they are in a technical one. This separation of process from outcome is fundamental to neo-institutional approaches to change and agency.

In fact, the aspect of most interest for this discussion is the change process and, correspondingly, which causal elements and factors lead to changes in school management activity. Jepperson (1991) argues that environmental contexts and collective agency are strong influences and can lead to action bringing change through contradictions or opposition to institutionalized social elements. He asserts that these "contradictions, or,

separately, exogenous environmental shocks, can force institutional change by blocking the activation of reproductive procedures or by thwarting the successful completion of reproductive procedures, thus modifying or destroying the institution” (Jepperson 1991, p. 153). In other words, strong exogenous influences can initiate change in institutional structures and procedures. Therefore, isomorphism through environmental context suggests that agency is at work, but more so at the collective than individual level.

Change, however, must not necessarily be initiated by severe elements outside of the institution. Although institutional forms and scripts are applied very uniformly across many semi-public environments (e.g., schools and hospitals), individuals and collectivities may ‘shop’ for the script or model they prefer depending on the context and situation in which they will apply it or conform to it. As a result, the interactive character of legitimacy-seeking is interesting given that outcomes of institutional structures and processes often do not change in spite of changes in form and script that may occur.

Still, the main criticisms of this approach focuses on questions of rational choice and decision-making. Without actors, rational choice and decision-making cannot exist, and without the option or ability to rationally make decisions some have suggested that neo-institutional theory does not allow for the humanity and reality of change, growth, and even death that is empirically observable in every situation, environment, and cultural context and in particular in the managerial activity of school principals.

Conclusion

There is a relationship between the larger semi-public environments within which schools are embedded and the tasks on which organizational managers such as school principals spend their time. Hence variation in management activity from school to school, as well as from system to system, is a function of the complexity of both the institutional and technical environments of schools and schooling. In the highly charged institutional environments of schools, management activity is driven more by outside institutional pressures than internal concerns for technical output. This is not to say that technical output is not part of the environmental mix for schools or is not a concern of principals. Instead, a loosely coupled model suggests that many other objectives occupy principals’ time and efforts, and these are often institutional requirements from the outside (Meyer & Scott 1983).

Thus, for example, highly centralized national bureaucracies within which schools are situated can simplify the external environment of schools. Decentralized bureaucracies do the opposite. Principal management in the former may require fewer legitimizing activities because so many of the institutional demands on schools are met at a governance level above the school. An example of this would be a nationally centralized curriculum. Political and technical conflict over the nature of such a curriculum would more likely occur at more centralized or national level arenas than at the local school level. In this case principals would not have to do the work of developing and legitimating a curriculum with both the local community and other levels of the instructional leadership. Instead, their job would be to technically assist faculty in implementing this curriculum. This kind of reasoning about the centralization of school bureaucracies and school management activity leads to several assumptions: (1) the complexity of schools’ organizational environments varies cross-nationally, (2) nationally decentralized educational systems create more complex technical

environments than centralized systems do, and (3) in more complex organizational environments, principals spend more time managing external technical processes of schooling. Less complex environments lead to the opposite.

In other words, school management activity may be directed more towards external legitimacy than internal management depending on the penetration of regional or national level governance into local schooling and schools. This means that schools with fewer institutional requirements and penetration can be more overtly accommodating to local community and cultural influences. In turn, principals in decentralized systems vary their activity more by the particular demands of their communities and student populations than models of legitimate activity imposed or expected by their external governing bodies. Therefore, as Fuller and Clarke (1994) suggest, system or school level inputs and resources may influence the categorical performance and production of school actors such as principals, but penetration of local culture and community influences can particularize performance and activity of those actors as well. Thus, a balance between influences may be achieved or attempted although the level at which each is a significant predictor of principal managerial activity may differ: technical-rational processes dominating the school level and organizational environment dominating the national level. In general, however, the institutional environment of schools will have as much influence on public school administration and management as the technical environment.

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