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ABSTRACT

Parent-run free schools (parent coops) differ markedly from public schools in size and organizational structure, but this paper shows that these new institutions share the problem of teacher supervision. Conclusions are based on intensive study of three parent coops using both participant observation and interviewing. Parent coops must deal with a form of conflict between professional and bureaucratic-employer authority. Parents lack the means to control teacher activity; but where selection is successful, the mechanisms of accommodation are similar to those found in public schools. (Author)

THE BALANCE OF CONTROL BETWEEN PARENTS AND TEACHERS IN "CO-OP" FREE SCHOOLS

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THE BALANCE OF CONTROL BETWEEN PARENTS AND TEACHERS IN "CO-OP" FREE SCHOOLS

One spin-off of the educational reform activity of the sixties and early seventies was the free school movement whose members started educational institutions of their own because they despaired of ever improving the public schools. One of the most common kinds of free schools is the parent co-op which is founded and run by parents with the help of one or a few teachers that it hires. These schools are supposed to provide freedom, not only for students in the classroom, but also for other members through an open governance structure that allows all participants a greater input to decision making than is believed to exist in conventional public schools (Graubard, 1972). Since this movement was influenced by the idea of community control, parents expect to have a major voice in determining policy. In spite of the intention to develop new administrative-governmental arrangements, however, parent co-ops share with public schools the problem of effectively controlling the teacher's in-class activity. This problem stems from similar conflicts over the extent of the superior's authority and constraints on teacher supervision. Even the mechanisms used to resolve this problem in parent co-ops, when it is resolved, are similar to those found in more conventional educational organizations.

Examination of teacher-superior lations in parent co-ops provides useful insights into the nature of teachers' work settings more generally. Lortie (1969) has called for more comparative studies to describe and explain the nature of teacher autonomy in school systems, and parent co-ops represent a limiting case with respect to variation in school size and chain of command.

The parent co-op is much smaller than the public school; two-thirds of all free schools enroll fewer than forty students, and parent co-ops are among the smaller free schools (Graubard, 1972). Because of its small size, the parent co-op lacks the professional administrative cadre typically found in almost all other schools. Every task not assigned to the teacher is taken care of by parents, and parents and teachers deal with each other directly without intermediary. In spite of these gross structural differences, the problem of staff control in conventional and co-op schools is remarkably similar. Moreover, although current reformers and historians of the common school both emphasize the importance of large, bureaucratic structures for insulating schools from public control, the problems parents have when working with teachers in these small co-ops suggests that a careful analysis may uncover other factors that are equally effective barriers to substantial lay input into the direction of all schools (Katz, 1971; Tyack, 1972).

An understanding of parent-teacher relations in parent co-ops may also contribute to the survival rate of these schools. Previous research has indicated that these schools may have an average life span as short as eighteen months and that their demise is frequently the result of internal conflict in which the teacher is either the issue or a major participant (Firestone, 1974). Examination of how accommodation between parents and teachers is reached may help alleviate such conflict.

Authority Problems in Other Organizations

The basis of bureaucratic or employer authority is the definition of roles as spelled out in the law or the contracts of workers in the organization (Gerth and Mills, 1946; Blau, 1964). These definitions specify the worker's tasks, the positions that have the right to give him orders, the

range of behaviors those positions have discretion over, and the consequences of non-compliance. The professional's authority rests largely on his distinctive knowledge base or competence to successfully complete the work of his position (Parsons, 1947), and problems arise when the incumbents of a formally subordinate position believe that their special knowledge is equal to or greater than that of their superiors. Legally, public school systems are rigidly heirarchical with authority in all areas concentrated in the school board to be delegated to the superintendent and his subordinates; yet, teachers feel justified in resisting administrative direction because they see their role as a professional one that should command authority because of their expertise (Bidwell, 1965). This problem is shared by universities (Baldridge, 1971) and hospitals (Goss, 1961). The situation is somewhat different in parent co-ops because the internal allocation of authority is not legally specified and contracts are rarely written. Still, the teacher is hired to do a specific job; and parents, as employers, judge the adequacy of her work. Moreover, the free school ideology emphasizes the legitimacy of consumer preferences in education and undercuts professional authority. In contrast to more established institutions, however, parent co-ops may be destroyed if tensions between parents and teachers cannot be resolved.

At least three means to alleviate the tension caused by conflicting principles of authority have been found in other kinds of organizations. Lortie (1969) points out that selection of public school teachers begins in their training institutions and usually brings to the occupation individuals whose ideas and abilities are compatible with the organizations in which they work. Once in the school the teacher usually finds a pattern of variable zoning of authority in which initiatory power and control changes with the issue. Principals create and enforce rules concerning administrative matters

including the allocation of money, materials, and non-classroom space; but they only give suggestions with regard to instructional matters (Lortie, 1969). A similar pattern of variable zoning exists in medical school clinics where the director, a physician, posts the schedule that pairs medical students with doctor-instructors. This schedule is mandatory but the director only gives suggestions to doctors about how to treat patients (Goss, 1961). Variable zoning will not work in parent co-ops unless parents are willing to relinquish control over the area that is crucial to them, classroom activities. A final means is to personalize relations between the teacher and her administrative superior. Carlson (1972) reports on a school superintendent who treats teachers in a warm, personal manner that minimizes heirarchical distance and who relies on teacher loyalties to him as a person to minimize tensions and gain compliance. The development of personal relations and a distribution of authority in parent co-ops depends on successful teacher selection.

The Schools Studied

To examine the relations between parents and teachers in co-op schools, three case studies were conducted over a two year period ending in the spring of 1973. Both Unity and Liberation schools* opened with fifteen families, twenty-five students, and two teachers. Like so many other parent co-ops, Liberation had undergone schism just before the study began. Because the group that kept the original name declined rapidly during the study, most field work was done with the Renaissance faction of the old school which had six families, eight students, and two part-time teachers. During most of the study, Unity had a few more than twenty-five families, about forty

*The names of all schools are fictitious.

students, and three teachers. Second Primary began during the study period and had eleven families, as many students, and two teachers. All the schools used variants on the open classroom approach to instruction (Featherstone, 1971). Participant observation was supplemented by interviews with thirty-eight families and six teachers from among all the ~~teachers~~ schools. The semi-structured interviews were designed to gather information on the history of the schools, working relations within them, and the orientations of individuals towards a number of ideological issues. These case studies were accompanied by an examination of the free school literature to ascertain the impact of the national movement on parent-teacher relations in individual schools.* The following sections of this paper will discuss parents' views of their own authority in a co-op school, the rewards and sanctions that affect the teacher's behavior, and finally the bases of accommodation between parents and teachers.

Parents' Views of Their Authority

Parents' views of their roles in co-op schools have been shaped by two radical strains of educational reform thought. The community control ideology is more specific in demanding that professional personnel be responsive to the needs and wishes of the clientele served. It is based on the thesis of Carmichael and Hamilton (1968) that the failure of public institutions in ghetto areas stems from control of those institutions by outsiders instead of their local clienteles. While this critique acknowledges that professionals may have special competence, it holds that their only motivation is to keep their jobs and perhaps serve the needs of majority group children in the

*Extended discussion of the study's methodology is found in Firestone (1974).

schools; the nature of school governance is believed to keep members of minority groups from preserving experts to use their competence to help local children. While free school thinkers emphasize ways to improve classrooms, they are concerned with developing happiness and warm human relations in all settings and eliminating "false, constraining" role distinctions between student, teacher, parent, and so forth so people can deal with each other as individuals (Katz, 1971). While this ideology does not directly increase parents' authority, it undermines that of the teacher.

Parents in these schools definitely want to influence teachers' work. Table 1 shows that parents concerns center on the quality of education their children receive from the parent co-op (items 1 and 2). Since the educational

TABLE 1

PARENTS' RATINGS OF BENEFITS
OF MEMBERSHIP IN CO-OP SCHOOLS*

Items of Importance	Very Important 4	3	2	Not At All Important 1	$\bar{X}$
1. That my child learn things not learned in public schools.	19	0	0	0	4
2. That my child have the freedom to learn at his own speed.	16	3	0	0	3.8
3. That I can influence the decisions of teachers.	14	4	0	1	3.6
4. That I like the parents.	7	11	1	0	3.3
5. That the school help change American education.**	5	7	3	3	2.8

*Asked of parents in Second Primary and Renaissance Schools only.

**One non-respondent.

program is determined by the teacher, interest in influencing decisions she makes (item 3) is almost as important to parents as the quality of the program itself. Other benefits of membership (items 4 and 5) are much less important.

Although parents want to influence teachers, they do not seek dictatorial control. They feel they have ultimate, collective power over a teacher, but they do not make extensive use of it and generally prefer to leave the teacher alone unless something goes wrong:

> My view is that I'm willing to delegate authority until /teachers/ act so as to offend my sensibility... I've had no reason to influence them so far. (SP 10*)

Parents respect the teacher's need for some autonomy, but they all agree that it is good to be able to influence a teacher where it is necessary, and the need for parent influence arises frequently in these schools. During Unity's first year, its classroom was plagued by chaos that prohibited any organized program of learning, and parents had to step in. Two years later, when the school tried to integrate its teaching force by hiring a black, male teacher, it chose a man who could not work with small children and did not get along with the other teachers, so parent action was again needed. The program that Liberation's first teachers offered did not provide enough guidance to suit many of the school's parents, and the ensuing argument among parents over whether to change teaching practices and how led to a schism. The following year the Liberation faction hired a teacher who provided a program with too much guidance and discipline for members who tried to

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*This numbering system is used to refer to parent interviews. The first letters are the initials of the school the parent belongs to, and the number refers to the specific person. Teachers are given pseudonyms.

convince him to take a more relaxed approach. Although parents want to be able to influence their teacher, and the need for such influence often arises, the following section will show that they lack the resources to do so successfully.

Rewards and Sanctions

To understand how effectively parents control the teacher, one must know which rewards or sanctions they control and which ones have the greatest impact on the teacher. The most fundamental sanction parents have is the right to fire teachers who do not meet expectations, but this right is almost impossible to exercise. Firing a teacher requires a group decision that parents are reluctant to make. Unity never faced the problem of removing its most inexperienced teacher during its first year or the black teacher in its third. Both times the decision was delayed until the teacher in question resigned voluntarily. When hiring the black teacher was first discussed, parents said that they would not fire him if he did not work out because of the damage firing would do to his record. When Liberation found itself with a teacher who was too directive for most members, discussion of what to do dragged on for months while several families left the school, and its financial base crumbled until it could not pay him, and he quit. A few months later the school was disbanded.

Firing is a difficult action to employ because it is so undifferentiated and drastic. Even the threat of firing cannot be used in minor cases where parents want to convince teachers to change their approach. Parents must let minor disagreements go until a series of events develop into a major altercation, and firing is the only recourse. As a result, firing is only used as a last resort when the situation has become hopeless, and parents and teachers have reached an impasse. Then it is used to make a fresh start.

Other organizations find prestige and salary distinctions to be more differentiated and less drastic means for controlling employee behavior. While some informal prestige differentiation occurs in parent co-ops, formal distinctions are rarely found, primarily because the teachers prefer egalitarian to heirarchic structures. The first teacher at Second Primary was offered a higher salary than the then unhired second one, but she turned it down. Similarly, after Unity had just hired two new teachers, I asked the old one how it felt to be the senior person, and she said she hoped the differences she felt would disappear. Because of teachers' preferences for equal treatment, parents cannot offer additional prestige to those they prefer.

Moreover, the insecure financial position of these schools prohibits a differentiated salary structure. These schools paid their teachers from $300 to $440 per month, one-half to one-third of what some of them could have made teaching in public schools even if fringe benefits are not counted. Parent co-ops just do not have the resources to offer larger salaries to better teachers.

These low salaries raise the question of why teachers work in parent co-ops at all, and suggest that these schools must have some non-economic incentives to offer. To find out what these incentives are, interviews were conducted with six teachers that parents would very much like to keep: two each in Unity, Renaissance, and Second Primary. The incentives they discussed cannot be controlled by parents.

Lortie (1969) argues that the most important rewards for public school teachers come from the "transitive" aspects of their role. He says that transitive rewards arise when a teacher's communication produces student responses the teacher defines as learning. His indicator is the high rate

of choosing the statement "knowing that I have 'reached' students and they have learned" as a favored reward among teachers. More generally, transitive rewards come from student feedback from school activities and may take a variety of forms. For instance, a teacher may appreciate the enjoyment children show during games or outdoor activities she has organized. My interviews did not bear directly on this point since my primary question, "What do you like about working here?" elicit sons of teaching settings more than discussions of what is common to all of them. Still, four teachers specifically mentioned that they liked the children they work with.

Students in public schools have the capacity to grant or deny the responses that teachers consider their primary "payment," but the effects that formal superiors have on such responses are indirect. Since the teacher's gratification depends primarily on what takes place in the classroom, she can be relatively independent of administrators, and her relationships with them can move from subordination towards an exchange of compliance on administrative matters in return for autonomy and support on pedagogical issues. Similarly, in parent co-ops the importance to teachers of the children's responses increases their independence from parents.

Parent co-ops also offer teachers two kinds of incentives public schools cannot offer, and both increase independence from parents. First, parent co-ops offer a work setting with less supervision than is often found in public schools. The urge to work in a setting without constraining supervision was mentioned by two teachers with public school experience. Mark, from Renaissance, had been a member of a team led by a certified teacher. His reaction to the experience is that

> I felt hypocritical because I had to carry out her policies and not mine. I had to behave with kids the way she would, and I would copy her attitude for safety's sake.

All told, four of the six teachers indicated that they liked the freedom the free school setting offered.

A second reason for working in free schools is an interest in pedagogical reform. All but one of these teachers are to some degree committed to teaching n occupation; yet, none of them is interested in the conventional style of teaching found in public schools. Furthermore, all but one show some interest in reforming education, and those five hope their work in free schools will contribute to that end. They believe that free schools can promote change by providing models to public schools of working alternatives to current practice:

> Q: Do you see free schools as a means of changing the American education system?
>
> R: They have the potential. By having a very good program with well worked out ideals... and then promoting and advertising, we can do something. A lot of teachers in training will be influenced. (Rachel)

Since these teachers' primary responsibility is to the schools they work for, few of them have actually tried to publicize their work, but their intention to do so is stronger than that of most parents, and some have been able to move beyond total concentration on their own school. All of them, however, are interested in the American educational scene and keep in touch with city-wide and national reform efforts.

This interest in reform is part of the teachers' political orientation. In their middle or late twenties, they all attended college in the late sixties where most had taken part in peace or civil rights activities, and they see teaching as a way to bring the country closer to their ideals for it

> /The move to Unity/ was partly politically motivated... I think our society stinks pretty much as it is. I want to change it. This is the most effective way I can work to change things for the better. (Sharon)

This political-reformist orientation gives teachers another yardstick for measuring their own performance. Because they are trying to promote a new approach to teaching in America, they have a larger purpose with goals that may not coincide with those of parents.

Because parents have very little influence over a teacher once she is hired, selection is critical. The importance of selection is recognized by parents who devote a great deal of time and attention to the task and who make comments like the following:

> We've spent so much time talking about philosophy... Finally, it is the teachers that count. I want to make sure ahead of time that we have the right teachers. (SP 12)

Although selection is crucial, continued working relations between parents and the teacher are facilitated by mechanisms similar to those found in other organizations.

Personal Relations

Successful parent co-ops are characterized by mutual respect and friendship between parents and the teacher. Parents prefer not to worry about day-to-day classroom affairs and intervene only when the teacher is taking an approach that is too directive or not directive enough or when no approach is being pursued effectively.

Since parents would rather not monitor classroom activities closely, a teacher can develop a great deal of autonomy and even influence in school affairs by convincing them that she is a good educator and earning their respect. Jean's career at Unity indicates the amount of influence a teacher can develop. In the spring of the school's tumultuous first year, some parents wanted to fire her, and no one consulted her about general school affairs. When the other teacher quit and Sharon was hired, Jean was not

consulted; she only met her new associate after the decision was made. Two years later when the school was doing very well and credit for its success went mostly to her, she played a very directive role. Parents did everything possible to redesign the classroom space as she wanted it, and they solicited her opinion during teacher hiring. In another instance, Second Primary began by choosing two teachers whose work they knew and respected and giving them a great deal of autonomy. In all schools, no teacher who had proven herself was actively supervised or instructed.

On the other hand, successful teachers usually like the parents they work for. All six who were interviewed liked working with parents. Some appreciate that parents try to support their efforts like Liza from Renaissance who says:

> It's been really good with this group out of school... They have been incredibly helpful and concerned.

Others like the social life of parent co-ops and parent-teacher relations often transcend the business aspect of association so personal friendships develop:

> The majority of my friends, of my contacts besides the people I met through /my husband/ are in Second Primary... They are active in the neighborhood, in the arts, and in other things I'm interested in. (Rachel)

The possibility for friendly, personal relations between parents and teachers is enhanced because free school teachers deal with fewer parents than those in public schools do and they work with the same ones for several years. These friendships provide important reasons for teachers wanting to co-operate with parents.

Variable Zoning of Authority

Parents' orientation to hire a teacher and then support her is recognition that she is the central figure in the day-to-day operation of the

school. One factor that impedes close control of public school teachers is the ecological arrangement of conventional institutions. Superintendents do not even work in the same buildings as teachers, and the self-contained classroom minimizes principal supervision. Like her public school counterpart, the free school teacher is essentially free from supervision and without professional support. The teacher and her children are in a classroom in one building, and parents are scattered in homes and workplaces throughout the city. Although a few parents work regularly for short periods in the school, only the teacher knows what is needed to maintain and improve it; if the teacher and parents agree on how the classroom should be run, their direction may undermine her efforts; and in fact, she may need to make suggestions to parents to get the support most helpful for making the classroom everyone wants. A teacher who has earned the parents' respect may be the most influential person in the school. Paradoxically, her influence more than the parents' is limited by a pattern of variable zoning. The teachers direct parents' work in activities needed to support the school but have little say in governance, while the question of what treatment shall be accorded particular children is one where both parents and teachers have influence and the balance of control is not clear.

Work Activities

The major activity not directly related to the classroom in these schools is financial management; teachers are not active in this area. Parents keep the books and fill financial committees. They also are solely responsible for routine activities like weekend clean-ups and finding field trip drivers.

Teachers play a more active role in other areas. If they are to get useful help in the classroom from parents, they must give some instruction

Parents enjoy working in the classroom for the same reason the teacher does: they like to see that the class enjoys what they bring in. Some parents, however, do not know how to organize activities that appeal to children. These parents would like to help, but do not know how. Without some guidance, they will become disappointed and drop out; but with some help they will continue to participate:

U8: The first year I went in and didn't... know what to do. The second year I was the... Nature Club Leader... /Now/ people have definite times. People are coming in and doing definite things...

Q: I get the feeling you were uncomfortable about that.

U8: Yes...

U9: You could take stuff in any time you want to, but /U8/ was uncomfortable, the whole school was uncomfortable with that kind of thing.

When the teacher found this mother a curriculum aid, the Nature Club program, that helped her organize her work in the school, she was much happier. Similar cases appear in other schools where volunteers flounder until they find a type of presentation to make that kids enjoy; and if the teacher does not always help find these presentations, parents often say they wish she would.

Outside the classroom teachers help set the agenda for meetings and decide what issues parents must face. Early in 1972, when Renaissance was existing on a month-to-month basis because of financial problems, the teacher felt the children needed more guaranteed stability. Because she felt that if the school was going to fold it should do so quickly, she forced parents to consider its long range future and try to plan further ahead.

Usually teachers take the lead on questions more closely related to the classroom. In some schools parents are expected to help provide curriculum materials, furniture, and equipment, and to help improve the physical space.

At Unity, which makes the heaviest demands on parents' time, teachers decide what projects are needed and help set priorities. For instance, teachers take up large sections of the last meeting each year explaining the projects they want done over the summer.

Teacher direction of parent work requires more of teachers than just making requests. If the several work weekends Unity has each year are to be maximally productive, teachers must play a large part in organizing them:

> /My role in work weekends/ is partly supervisory. Letting people know what jobs need to be done. Partly, it's painting and doing jobs yourself. We have the best knowledge of what needs to be done... We make sure things are out and people know what to do on them. (Sharon)

The special knowledge about how things should go places an extra burden on teachers; but because of their knowledge, their direction is essential for parent work.

Special Treatment for Individual Children

If teachers are work leaders in the whole school, their position is more questionable when it comes to decisions about individual children. There the balance of control is more fuzzy because the right to make decisions is shared, the rules about who makes the final decisions are not clear, and the issue is very important to parents and teachers. The question is all the more likely to arise because the open classroom format of these schools allows considerable discretion to devise a special approach for each child (Firestone, 1974).

Most parents believe that they can influence the teacher's decisions about the instruction of individual children. At Unity the parents who most strongly support the school firmly believe that teachers adjust their approach to a child to fit parents' wishes. An attempt at more systematic questioning was made at Renaissance and Second Primary. In seventeen of twenty-one

families in the two schools, at least one parent in each family was asked, "In general do you think you can influence the approach teachers here take towards your child?" They all said yes and agreed as well that they had more influence over free school teachers than they would over those in the local public schools.

There is a crucial ambiguity, however, about the amount of influence parents do have. Although they have more than they would in other situations, they do not have a dictatorial last say, and usually do not want it:

> It's important that I can influence the teachers, but it's important that they can hold their own too. (SP5)

Parents feel the teacher should have a substantial margin of liberty on decisions about their own children and that such matters should be worked out collaboratively because they respect the teacher's ability. Teachers agree, but each teacher also feels very strongly that she ought to act on her own judgement.

Information on the treatment actually given particular children is only available at Unity where special treatment was a minor issue while interviewing was in progress. The basic continua along which parents want treatment to vary are discipline and instruction in basic skills, and there are some well known cases where student treatment fits parents' desires. Ella, a well known conservative parent, is much more concerned that her child learn the 3R's than is Martha, a vocal radical; and Ella's son gets much more pressure and help than does Martha's. These two cases are most frequently mentioned by parents as evidence that teachers do respect the wishes of parents. Furthermore, teachers report that in other cases as well they adjust their approach to fit the parents' wishes, even when they do not altogether approve.

There are, however, clear cases where teachers would not adjust their approach to fit parents' wishes. Three families left Unity at the end of 1971-72 mostly because they felt their children were not getting enough instruction. One of those mothers gave the following report:

Q: Do you get as much /instruction for your child/ as you want?

U14: Ella claims it is true for her. The teachers keep in touch with her. It's not true for us. We asked that /our son/ learn the multiplication tables. That was almost all we asked them to do. They started with him and then dropped it.

While it is doubtful that a family would leave a school over multiplication tables alone, it is clear that this one wanted more instruction for its child than it was getting. Besides these cases, at least two more families would have liked their children to receive more instruction than the teachers were giving.

Where the teacher's ability is generally acknowledged, decisions--or non-decisions, since special treatment is not usually an issue--about how individual children should be treated are made collaboratively and harmoniously most of the time because both parents and teachers recognize and approve of the right of the other to play a role in those decisions. Where there is disagreement, however, there is no clear rule about who has the last word. While the teacher can persist on a program contrary to what parents wish, such behavior is very likely to drive the family out of the school; and a number of irreconcilable disagreements may force a school to close.

Conclusion

While it is tempting to dwell on the great differences between public schools and parent co-ops, an analysis of their similarities throws new light on the balance between control and autonomy in teaching. Both organizations share the problem of controlling the teacher's in class activity in

spite of substantial differences in size and chain of command. Three similarities help account for this problem. First, while the reasons differ--tenure rules exist in one case and in the other it is difficult for parents to make the decision--it is hard to fire the teacher from either institution. Second, the teacher in both organizations receives substantial rewards from children--rewards (services) that the supervisor cannot effectively manipulate. Finally, the isolation of the classroom makes supervision difficult.

Although it seems more difficult to develop co-operative working relations between parents in a co-op school and their teacher than it is between the principal and his teachers, the mechanisms that facilitate such a development are also quite similar in both cases. Selection is important in public schools and seems to be crucial in the parent co-op. Where selection is successful, a pattern of friendship and mutual respect often develops. Personal relations are strengthened by a division of authority that leaves teachers substantial authority in the classroom and actually places them in a leadership position in parent co-ops. In the parent co-op at least, this variable zoning of authority does not cover the crucial question of who decides what treatment specific children shall receive. Resolution of differences over the teacher's authority is more important in the parent co-op, however, than in the public school since failure to reach agreement may contribute directly to the demise of the parent run school.

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