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ABSTRACT

This study looked at conceptions of effective high schools held by high school principals, central office staff members, and representatives of the state department of education in Delaware. Data were collected through personal interviews and analyzed through "phenomenological content analysis." Four very different images of effectiveness emerged. The first image or conception emphasized program characteristics of effective high schools. The second image focused on the characteristics of personnel as the central determinants of effectiveness. Rules, regulations, and job descriptions were emphasized in the third image, the bureaucratic conception of effectiveness. The last image, a unified concept, combined characteristics of the other images and appeared to view effectiveness more holistically. The most frequent image was a combination of the program and personnel images. Ways to check the construct validity of the images include the use of Cronbach's definition of construct validity, an examination of the internal logical consistency among images, and an analysis of the responses organized into chart form. Metaphors and assumptions about the purposes of schooling can be inferred from the images. (Author/JM)

Images of Effective High Schools: An Interview Study of Delaware's Educational Administrators

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Abstract

The paper reports a study of high school principal's, central office staff's, and state department supervisors' descriptions of effective high schools. Four very different conceptions or images of effectiveness were uncovered in content-analyzing the data. The first image emphasized program characteristics of effective high schools. The second image emphasized personnel such as teachers and administrators as the central determinants of effectiveness. Rules, regulations, and job descriptions were emphasized in the third image, summarizing a bureaucratic conception of effectiveness. The last image, a unified emphasis, combined characteristics of the other images and appeared to view effectiveness more holistically. The paper concludes with a discussion of construct validity and implications of the findings for the educational practice of administrators.

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Introduction

Ideas guide behavior. Educational administrators have ideas about their organizations: ways of conceptualizing what the organization is, how it functions, and their own role in it. These ideas, or personal constructs, guide their behavior. If a principal has an idea that his main duty is to keep the "ship running smoothly", and he perceives that the superintendent judges his performance by the number of disgruntled phone calls received in the superintendent's office, then the principal is likely to construct his own role to meet those goals. Each person has a "personal construct system" by which they organize their world (Kelly, 1963). Perhaps the best introductory statement to personal construct theory comes from Bannister and Fransella (1971):

> What a person does, he does to some purpose and he not only behaves, but he intends to indicate something by his behavior. Indeed, in construct theory terms, behavior becomes not a reaction but a proposition, not the answer but the question ... Behavior, like words ..., has meaning and changing and elaborating meaning at that. (p. 46)

Constructs assist individuals to interpret and predict what is happening or will happen within their world (Bussis, Chittenden and Amarel, 1976, Combs, 1970). Yet constructs can be modified through experience. Constructs can be ordered hierarchically into construct systems to provide for consistency and stability for an individuals' interaction with the world. However, modification in thinking does occur as construct systems become reorganized.

This study begins to test the idea that educational leaders' constructs or images about their organizations can be aggregated according to themes

present across interviews. I believe that the images educational leaders have about their organizations have implications for how they play their role and the overall effectiveness of school and school districts. This paper is a first attempt at testing this personal construct in a disciplined way.

Background for the Study

The results reported in this paper were part of a larger study of administrators in Delaware (Squires, 1981). The Delaware State Department of Public Instruction (DPI) in 1978 mandated a state-wide competency-based education design. The standards, a part of the competency-based education design, served as criteria for making judgements about the effectiveness of schools. The standards developed as a result of six case studies for elementary schools. Three high achieving and three low achieving schools, as measured by standardized test scores, were compared and the differences formed the foundation on which the standards were built (Spartz, et al., 1977). Using the standards, each school in the state would be assessed once every five years. After a one-year field test of the standards, it was determined that they needed to be revised to more adequately reflect the concerns of secondary schools.

During the revision, the Division of Instruction of DPI sponsored a study of all 26 high school principals in the state, 16 central office personnel and 8 representatives of the state department to determine 1) their perceptions of an effective high school, 2) suggestions for revision of the current standards. This paper reports the results of the

first phase of that study - administrators' perceptions of an effective high school. Of particular interest are the images which appeared to anchor administrators' construct systems.

This paper is divided into four parts. The first part provides a rationale for the use of a phonomenological methodology. Next, the content analysis procedures are listed. Then the results of the content analysis are described and summarized. A discussion of the results concludes the paper.

Methodology

Interviews were chosen as the best way to gather information because, 1) busy school administrators do not need more forms to fill out, 2) interviews would allow for discussion of opinions, 3) interviews provided opportunities for the administrators to receive a personalized introduction to the standards and monitoring process. Fifty-two participants were sent a letter by the State Director of Instruction asking for their cooperation in the interview process and explaining the purposes of the interview. Enclosed in the letter was a copy of the existing standards and the questions which would be asked in the interview. Interviews were granted by fifty of the fifty-two participants.

Eight state department staff and two consultants were trained in open-ended interview techniques and recording procedures in order to conduct interviews.

During the interview, the interviewee was asked to respond to the question "What are the characteristics of an effective high school?"

The interviewer then took notes on what was said and the notes became part of the raw data used in the analysis. When the interviewee could add nothing else, then the interview was completed.

Rationale for Phenomenological Method

The results reported in this paper came from reflecting on the differences between individual interviews. The administrators appeared to have very different images of an "effective school", as their descriptions of effective schools were constructed in different ways. How to systematically describe those differences posed a problem.

A phenomenological methodology, one way to conduct a content analysis, was considered appropriate for this particular problem.

> Our (phemonenological) approach ... to our subject matter follows an exploration of what things mean to people, which leads us to explore the horizons of meaning and how they are organized in the experience of the person into a coherent world and a sense of himself as a part of it. (Keen, 1975, p. 17)

Horizons of meaning, the backdrop against which events are experienced, are not usually the focus of attention, yet the horizons are clearly decisive for what things mean. For example, two people are sitting by a fire and one hands the other a poker. Against one horizon, the person might use the poker to put another long on the fire; in another, the person might use the poker to fend off ravenous wolves. Similarly, I suspect that administrators may have had different "horizons" from which they responded to the interview questions. A phenomenological content analysis would allow us to discern those horizons.

The horizons are inferred through the answer to the specific question about effective schools. The phenomenological method presumes that other interview questions, such as "Describe your school" or "Describe your role" would yield similar horizons, although the content of the foreground would not be the same. (Giorgi, 1970, describes other assumptions made by persons doing phenomenological inquiry.) It is further assumed that administrators have relatively stable ways of structuring the meaning of their worlds, and therefore the horizons would be relatively stable, despite the difference in the stimulus question. (Such a presumption has not been tested to my knowledge in phenomenological inquiry). Phenomenological inquiry, therefore, is not primarly concerned with content, but with the way that content is structured.

While each individual may structure the content of their response to questions differently, there may be similar ways of structuring that content across interviews; thus the world view of some administrators may be similar. Indeed, we would suspect relatively similar world views from administrators given their long professional training. This world view, the similar way of structuring content across interviews, we define as an image.

It is assumed that the description of the image tapped by a phenomenological analysis is relatively stable over time and the image defines a recognizable structure of meanings. The validity of an image can be partially tested if someone familiar with the subject can say, "Yes, I know a person who structures their world in similar ways."

Data Analysis

The following steps, adapted from previous work using a phenomenological methodology (Squires, 1978; Colaizzi, 1978), were followed.

In Step 1, interviews were read and reflected upon. During Step 2, each interview was divided into "meaning units". Meaning units are segments of interviews that appear to be important. From one of the interviews the following quote is taken to illustrate a meaning unit.

> "A strong athletic program is important to a high school. A large number of our students participate in various sports. One of the principle objectives of athletics is to teach good sportsmanship. Players as well as spetators learn this from a strong athletic program."

This meaning unit was reduced in Step 3 to the following: "Programs which enlist participation are important in teaching principles of conduct." The step 3 reduction at once raises the level of generality of the meaning unit while reducing the meaning unit to its essential elements.

During Step 4, the reduced meaning units are checked with the interview notes to see that the reduction did not significantly alter the meanings. (Another way to ensure validity is to take the reduced meaning units back to the interviewees and ask them if the reduction significantly altered their original meanings and intentions.)

During Step 5, all interviews were examined for common themes across interviews. These common themes will give hints about how various administrators structure their world. According to Colaizzi (1978), "the researcher must rely on his tolerance for ambiguity; he must proceed with the solid conviction that what is logically inexplicable may be existentially real and valid."

During Step 6, individual interviews were returned to in order to discover how they reflected the themes which were identified during step 5. In this case, interviews which appeared to reflect a similar "image" of an effective school were grouped together.

During Step 7, the interviews identified in step 6 were further condensed to produce a description of four images of effective schools.

Four Images of Effective Schools

Introduction

Four images of effective schools are described in this section. While each interview usually had a mixture of images, generally one image tended to predominate in most interviews. Thus the interviews could generally be classified according to what image predominated, although there were no "pure" images.

Program Image

The comprehensive high school which offers a smorgasboard of curricular and extra curricular programs, flexibly scheduled to meet diverse student needs, appear to be the most meaningful dimensions of this image of an effective school. This program focus is often tied with student success in persuing career goals after leaving school — either vocational or academic. While student needs provide the justification for the wide range of course offerings, the concept of needs receives little elaborations in the interviews. The written curriculum provides the framework for instruction, from which teachers can make instructional plans. The teachers should be well qualified and knowledgeable about subject matter in order to implement the program. Guidance counselors provide for appropriate

placement of students in courses; the placement meets students' needs. The administrator should be knowledgeable about curriculum and have the autonomy to allocate resources to maintain a curricular balance which meets students' needs. Courses are seen as defined sequences of activity which teach and reinforce basic skills. Groupings of students are usually made according to government funding categories, such as special education, vocational or gifted and talented. The administration encourages teachers to grow professionally in their curriculum specialties. The administrator works well with staff, community and students. The school reflects community needs and allows for community participation.

Personnel Image

Quality personnel working together is the most important characteristic of an effective high school. Personal qualities of teachers are more highly prized than their professional skills. The underlying strategy in building the school's organization is to hire quality personnel, give them the support necessary, and the staff, "will carry the ball." Informal communication within the organization is the norm, with the principal maintaining an open door policy at all times. The staff feels they are a vital part of the organization. Administrators are willing to listen to staff members. The administrator feels that if the staff has input into decision making, and if the staff has influence with the administration, then they will be loyal and will follow administrative leadership. School administration has a close personal relationship with the central office. Emphasis is placed on the human/interpersonal dimensions of instruction.

Teachers teach students first, and subject matter second. Students should be able to ask questions without feeling embarrassed. Concern, involvement, enthusiasm, a human environment and relaxed atmosphere characterize this orientation.

Bureaucratic Image

Accountability achieved through consistently defined expectations and clear roles are the themes of the bureaucratic image. Principals are held accountable for teachers' performance; teachers in turn are accountable for students' learning and performance on certain minimal criteria (grade level equivalents from standardized tests were most frequently mentioned). Student misbehavior may be used by the principal as an indicator that teachers are not performing their accountabilities. A standardized curriculum is established, and teachers are expected to teach within the curriculum, which gives all teachers a common goal. Decisions to change curriculum are made at the administrative level, although teachers have control of teaching methods. Written rules and regulations about curriculum, discipline and role expectations are valued, as the administrator perceives that students and teachers need to know what is expected of them. Rules and regulations help develop student responsibility although most socialization of students happens in the home. The direction for the school as a whole comes from the community and the district office through lines of authority. Documentation of an evaluation system for both staff and program is available at all times. A smooth running organization governed by enforced rules is the hallmark of the bureaucratic image.

Unified Image

The unified image is characterized by a holistic perspective which is built around the components of the other images: authority structures, personnel and program. However, these components were not reported as distinct nor separate; they were not part of a "laundry" list. In interviews where the unified image was in evidence, the characteristics of an effective high school were described so that one characteristic of effectiveness was described in relationship to another. Thus, the total description appeared cohesive and unified.

The school as an organization has a broadly defined purpose (usually stated at the beginning of the interview). This purpose provides a theme which was woven throughout the interview when talking about other aspects of the organization. For example, one administrator reports that the goal of an effective high school is to help adolescents into adulthood. Relationships in effective high schools are characterized by respect and care. Expectations are clear; the relationships reinforce the expectations; the expectations are linked to the school's purpose. Success is expected and insured in the classroom and throughout the school as a whole. Democratic principles influence the decision making processes of the school. The school's atmosphere reflects the school's purpose.

The members of the school organization hold the belief that students should be pushed and challenged. Students generate ideas which guide their

learning within a set of clear expectations set by the teacher. Students can see their progress through the curriculum, and have an understanding of the total program of the school. Knowledge of individual students and their world is valued by staff which builds a respect between staff and students; this knowledge is used, not as an end in itself, but to further successful attainment of program goals.

Teachers' actions reflect the purpose of the school. Staff evaluation and supervision are related to the school's purpose and the improvement of the instructional program. Curriculum work is syncronized so that teachers can share their expectations with each other. Thus all members of the staff are working with the schools' purpose in mind. Staff then also feel that they are a part of the school through their active contributions to class and other school activities and input into school decisions.

Democratic processes are consciously used. Individual responsibility for one's actions is stressed. Student control relies primarily on students' self-discipline -- a product of clear expectations which have been internalized. Students know what the ground rules are and support them. Students are provided with opportunities to clarify and expand what they believe and value while meeting program goals. Students feel comfortable in testing their ideas. Thus the school provides opportunities for democratic practice without being manipulative in doing so.

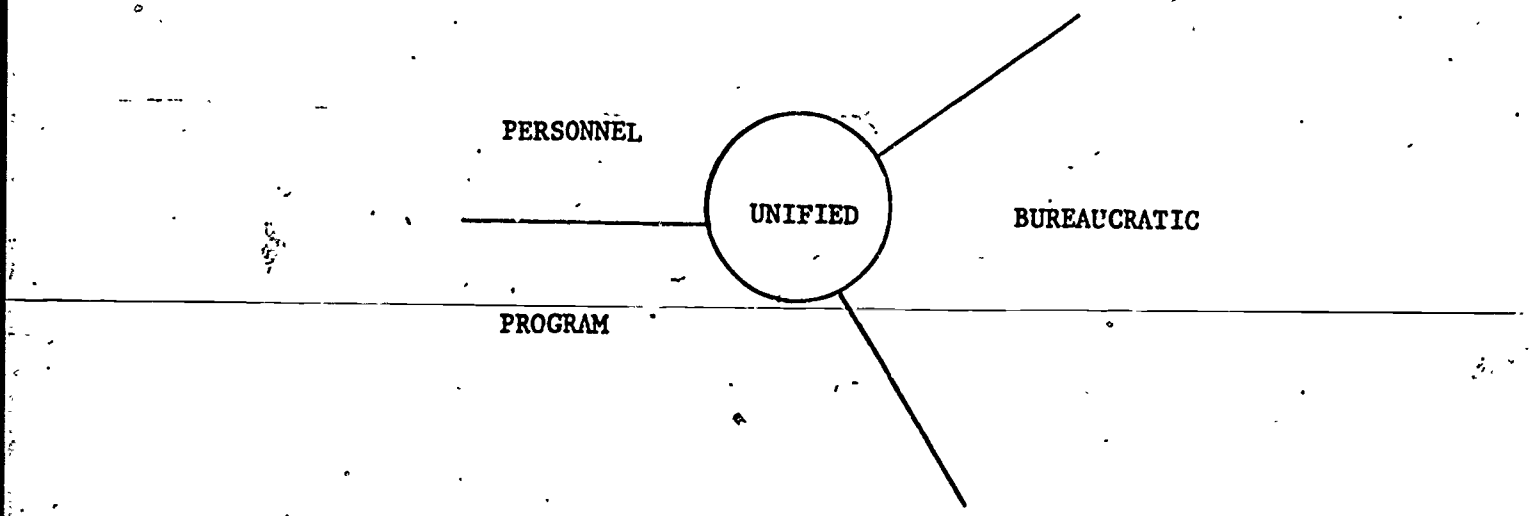
Administration provides an organizational climate appropriate for fulfilling the schools' purpose. The administration has a sense of the organization and consciously directs it, by successive approximation, toward

achieving its purpose. A mixture of methods are used: knowledge of the personal and professional interests of staff, a belief that program is shaped by the competencies of teachers and the needs of students, and the configuration of authority which supports student success. The central office provides necessary support while ensuring a principal's autonomy to make decisions. The community has access to school decision makers.

Summary of Images of Effective Schools

The chart (see page 13) summarizes the major components of each image. On the left hand side of the chart appears themes which were present across interviews. Along the top of the chart are the four images of effective schools. The cells within the resulting matrix are filled in with statements which summarize how administrators who hold a particular image may think about the theme addressed in the cell. The chart provides the basis for the discussion section.

Each of the images reveal a different facet of a school's organization. The existance of a unified image suggest that the various facets can be integrated into a holistic conception of a school's organization. The diagram below illustrates one way to picture the perceived dimensions of a school organization.



SUMMARY OF IMAGES

	PROGRAM EMPHASIS	PERSONNEL EMPHASIS	BUREAUCRATIC EMPHASIS	UNIFIED EMPHASIS
SCHOOL PARTICIPANTS				
Student	choose courses	socialization through interaction	performance on minimum competencies achievement at grade level	test and generate ideas value school ground rules assume responsibility for self discipline
Teacher	knowledgeable about subject matter expected to grow in curriculum specialty	teaches through his/her personality places emphasis on student as a person	accountable for students' performance especially on standardized instruments of achievement	define appropriate expectations of students and insure their success actively contribute to school-guide activities use knowledge of individual students to reach school's goals
Principal	maintain a balanced program	hire competent staff listen to staff and intervene informally	enforce discipline provide written rules and regulations establish roles through job descriptions evaluate and document	insure successful teaching define appropriate expectations for success direct organization through a continuation of strategies to achieve school goals
Central Office		maintain close personal ties with school	controls the direction of the school by setting expectations for principal	provides support allows autonomous decision making
Community	school reflects community need and allows for community participation		community controls the direction and emphasis of the central office	community has access to school decision makers
SCHOOL FOCUS/ SCHOOL GOALS	career goals: vocational or higher education	humane environment informality socialization	accountability smooth running organization	school's purpose is known and supported by participants individual responsibility for actions democratic processes used without manipulation respect and care
CURRICULUM	based on student need provides framework for courses guided by government funding categories		controlled by administration	coordinated so teachers can share expectations
INSTRUCTION	carry out curriculum in course form appropriate placement of students in courses provided by guidance counselors	human and interpersonal aspects emphasized	teachers decide appropriate methods by which a standardized curriculum is taught	provide opportunities for students to clarify beliefs and values, and test ideas
EVALUATION			evaluations should be documented for staff and program	related to school's purpose provides information for school improvement

The data from the interviews suggest that administrators generally tend to make comments about effective schools which could be classified in one of the four sections in the diagram, thus revealing a "horizon" from which they construct the specifics of their worlds. However, there were also those administrators whose comments placed them in two sections of the diagram. Most frequent was a combination between the program and personnel dimensions. After more systematic study, it may be possible to further validate the dimensions, then standardize and refine the coding procedure so administrators could do a self-assessment. Such an instrument might also yield a staff development tool for organizational planning.

Discussion

The discussion section is divided into three sections. In the first section issues around the construct validity of the images are discussed. Next, metaphors and assumptions which can be inferred from the images are given. The last section summarizes some ideas about schools which were absent from the interviews and the implications of viewing education as a means to an end.

Construct Validity

Cronbach (1960) defines construct validity as "an analysis of the meaning of test scores in terms of psychological concepts." In this study, the test was the question "Describe the characteristics of an effective high school". From the responses various images concepts were "discovered". The psychological concept being tested is whether the images constructed around the horizons of administrators provide a way to predict behavior.

For example, one such hypothesis might read, "If an administrator holds a personnel image of schools, then he is not likely to adopt curriculum packages as he conceptualizes and solves organizational problems." Of course, such a question is beyond the perimeters of this paper. As Cronbach (1960) states, "construct validity is established through a long-continued interplay between observation, reasoning and imagination." This study is a beginning in describing and validating four possible dimensions in a theory of administration.

While construct validity is established over a long period of time, I will suggest that a beginning can be made in validating these constructs by examining the internal logical consistency within images. There does appear to be a logical consistency within each image. For example, if program appears to be the main emphasis of the school, then students', teachers' and administrators' roles revolve around the delivering of the program.

Another way to check the construct validity is to examine the blanks in the summary chart. The blanks are where the interviews did not reveal any statements that could fill in a cell. For example, there are three blank cells in the personnel image column under community, curriculum and evaluation. If relationships among people are what make the school effective, then it appears logical that curriculum, and evaluation would not be highly valued. It is interesting that community wasn't mentioned as the personnel image values interpersonal relationships. In reviewing how the interview data was reduced, it appears that while community was mentioned

in interviews, community became subsumed under the statement "the principal maintains an open door at all times." On looking back on the interviews which fed the personnel image, it appears that community received an emphasis which was appropriate within the context of the complete interviews; the concept of community, while mentioned, did not receive a great deal of attention or elaboration. Thus the chart does suggest, like the periodic table of elements, where mistakes may have been made in interpreting the interviews.

On the other hand, when the information from the interviews is organized in a chart, it is relatively easy to fill in a blank box which would be consistent with the other general constructs within that image. Thus, the general image appears to assist with constructing specific responses in theme areas which received little attention in the interviews as indicated by the empty cells. To return to the previous example, I would suggest that the community box could be filled in with "administrators maintain an open door policy and close relations with the community." The four images, after further refinement, may allow predictions about behavior to be made, once the horizon or image is described and classified.

Further consistency within an image is also present between the themes under a particular image. Such consistency is further evidence of the construct validity of the images. For example, the students' and teachers' roles for each image appears to be consistent with descriptions of curricular and instruction across images. For example, under the bureaucratic image, students are expected to perform up to "grade level" or some other

minimum standards. The teachers' role is to be accountable for the students' performances. The curriculum acts as a control on what is taught, although the teacher has the authority over how to teach. It is in deciding how to teach that teachers fulfill their accountabilities in the bureaucratic image. Such internal logic gives the image part of its power and sense.

Another way to begin to establish the content validity of a concept is to relate the concept studied to existing concepts in the field. Stollard (1981) has done a review of the literature around the four images and has found similar conceptions. For example, Conant (1967) describes characteristics of an effective high school almost entirely along the dimensions revealed in the program image. Argyris (1953) and Argyris and Schön (1978) on the other hand, describe an effective organization in terms of the personnel image which focuses and values interpersonal relations. Weber (1947) describes dimensions of the bureaucratic image such as managerial control through a hierarchy of offices, regulated functions, and control through technical knowledge. The unified image has a parallel in Blake and Mouton's works (1964) which combines a concern for production with a concern for people as the most effective management stance. Thus, there are similar themes which are present in the literature on effective organizations which may argue that this approach is construct valid.

Education - Means and Ends

Of equal interest in discussing the results, is determining what was not mentioned in the interviews which might have been mentioned. For

example, in none of the images, and in none of the interviews was there any mention of education as an end in itself, that it is good to know a little history, geography and/or social skills as ends in their own right. Rather education, and hence the goals of effective schools, was more instrumental in nature. By that I mean that education was viewed as a means to an end, rather than an end itself. Education thus serves utilitarian functions such as preparation for jobs, further schooling and/or adulthood. I was personally more than a little concerned that no one provided a rationale for education as an end in itself.

Another aspect which was left out, was the notion of the school as an institution which renews itself every three to six years as students leave and teachers transfer or quit. Given this reality of schools, it is interesting to note that planning within the school, and a staff development program/process, which would guide improvement are notably lacking in administrators' descriptions of effective schools. It may be that this is not part of how they construct their own worlds.

Metaphors and Assumptions

Metaphors are hidden in the images. For example, a metaphor for students under the program image is that of consumer. Students are consumers of particular program products (courses) which meet their needs. The personnel image sees students as personalities. The school then assists in shaping that personality. In the bureaucratic image, students are in boot camp, bringing their performance up to requisite objective criteria. In the unified image, students are constructors, actively guilding the meanings of the world around them.

Also hidden in the images are assumptions about how people learn. In the personnel image it is assumed that students learn through the personalities of others. On the other hand, in the bureaucratic image, people learn because the curriculum has limited the content and scope appropriate for teaching and the students' needs. Teachers have unambiguous accountabilities and the necessary skills to decide on how to teach.

There are also metaphors implicit in the images about schools as organizations. The program emphasis sees the school as . "smorgasboard." The personnel image, with its emphasis on interpersonal relations, may contain the metaphor of the school as family, with an emphasis on socialization over any subject or content area. The bureaucratic image may be based on the metaphor of the school as a factory producing products (students) which conform to particular standards such as competencies. The unified image may be based on the school as an ecological system, with each aspect of the organization interrelated with other aspects, such that a change in one aspect results in a change as a whole. Such metaphors are one way to summarize the logical consistency within the images.

Conclusion

In this paper, four images of effective schools were described: the program image, the personnel image, the bureaucratic image and the unified image. These descriptions were gathered from fifty administrators of education in Delaware. A phenomenological content analysis procedure was used to reduce the interview data. Discussions of the findings centered

around the construct validity of the procedure and the metaphors and assumptions which appear to help structure the images.

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