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ABSTRACT

Research on grades 9-12 in an elite, coeducational private school in an urban area examined the effects of the school's social organization on students' commitment to educational goals and their sense of academic purpose. The author gathered data through 2 years of participant observation as a teacher-researcher and through questionnaire interviews with 87 percent of the school's 254 high school students. The questionnaire data on students' academic achievement, sociometric status among their peers, acceptance in college, feelings of satisfaction, socioeconomic status, and parent involvement in the school indicate that students placed a high value on academic achievement. Student values thus matched the school's and parents' formal values. Results of the participant observation suggest that three school characteristics fostered student commitment to achievement: the school's function as a close primary community, continuity over time in students' educational experiences, and students' substantial power over their own school lives. Further research is needed to discover whether other private schools stimulate student commitment in similar ways and whether such motivational mechanisms can help improve public schools. (Author/RW)

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STUDENT COMMITMENT AND PURPOSE IN A PRIVATE SCHOOL

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Abstract

Research on public education often concludes that low achievement is partly caused by a lack of student commitment to an educational goal. This study investigates the sense of academic purpose among students in a private high school in which all graduates go to college, and explores the mechanisms of student commitment built into the social organization of the school. Results show that commitment is a positive function of intensive face-to-face interaction in a primary community, the sense of history and tradition resulting from continuity in students' educational experiences, and the substantial power students have over their own school lives. These results add important qualitative information to the statistical debate over differences between public and private education and suggest ways to improve public schools.

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Introduction

Coleman, Hoffer and Kilgore (1981) concluded that private schools maintained better discipline and provided better cognitive outcomes than public schools, even when controlling for student backgrounds. In addition, students in non-Catholic private schools had higher levels of self-esteem and fate control than public school students.[1] Although there is substantial disagreement about the methodological adequacy of the Coleman, et al. study,[2] it has stimulated great interest in how private schools work and whether some of their advantages can be incorporated into public schools.

There are many organizational differences between public and private schools, such as size, finances, and governance. Also, students apply to the private school of their choice, and private schools select their students from the pool of applicants (Kraushaar, 1972). However, most of the organizational characteristics of public and private schools probably affect student outcomes indirectly, through more immediate aspects of student experience. For example, Grant (1981) has suggested that students in public schools lack a sense of purpose in their school lives, and do not commit themselves to academic work. Students in public schools often withdraw from the meaningless grind of classroom routine (Jackson, 1968) and immerse themselves in the excitement of peer group activities (Cusick, 1972). Taken together, these studies suggest that low student commitment and lack of academic purpose are crucial determinants of poor educational outcomes in public schools. The corollary hypothesis that high student commitment to academic norms is a feature of many private schools is reasonable, but we do not yet have supporting evidence. The present study investigates the degree of student commitment and how it is produced in a private school with a clear academic purpose.

Method

Data were collected as part of research about network structure and student stress in a private high school (Hansell, 1981, 1982). Of the 254 students in grades 9 through 12, 87% were individually interviewed about school life in 1976 for 30 to 45 minutes. These conversations were tape recorded. In exchange for the opportunity to collect these data, the author taught part-time in the school for two years and became well-acquainted with about 25 high school faculty and administrators. As a researcher-teacher, the author attended many student activities, and meetings with faculty and parents.[3] In addition, all school yearbooks and student newspapers on file for the past 20 years were systematically read.

The School Environment

This private, independent school enrolls 752 students in junior kindergarten through 12th grade. On approaching the building, one's eye is caught by a friendly splash of primary colors in a wall mural. The 15 year-old building looks well-used and functional. The high school (grades 9-12) and middle schools (grades 4-8) each have a three-story wing adjoining the central core of gymnasium, auditorium and cafeteria. A courtyard features a sculptured staircase, a fountain, and a statue which lacks an arm. Although some maintenance has suffered due to higher budgetary priorities, the school building hints at the prosperity of the community.

This school serves an affluent, well-educated neighborhood in a large midwestern city. Of the 254 high school students, 29% live within six blocks of the school, and 72% live within 22 blocks. According to the 1970 census, the neighborhood is well above the median in family income and education, and the two census tracts that include most of the school's immediate neighborhood rank among the highest in the city. School parents represent the city's professional, business and political elites.

Many small signs of wealth and status surround the school. For example, at intersections near most of the schools in the local police district, safety patrol boys and crossing guards help school children cross streets. But at intersections near this school, police officers help children cross streets and then patrol neighborhoods around the school. The school attempts to minimize differences in family backgrounds, and all the students wear blue jeans. But inevitably such differences are revealed when students compare vacations spent in Acapulco and Aspen with those spent at home. In the words of one student, "...a good background is having enough money and you know what to do with it." Ironically, many of the teachers are from middle-class backgrounds, and have modest financial resources.

The school depends on tuition fees for its operating budget. Although tuition for high school students was over $3000 at the time of the study, 80% of the parents make additional financial contributions. Also, there are periodic fund drives for capital improvements. Partial scholarships are given to 17% of the students, primarily on the basis of need.

Black students comprise about 12% of the high school population. Although it is unclear how many blacks receive financial aid, few live in the affluent school neighborhood. Most live between eight and sixteen miles from the school and commute up to two hours each day. Time spent commuting limits their involvement in school activities and for at least one student, was "...the eiptome of being black in (this school). Never totalling feeling <u>in</u> (the school), I always felt <u>at</u> (the school). The crosstown traveling was a daily reminder of this feeling." Compared with white students, black students report more modest socioeconomic backgrounds, have attended the school for fewer years, and express less satisfaction with school life. However, they do not differ from whites on academic achievement or sociometric status. Although black and white students tend to sit apart in the

cafeteria, they interact easily in all other school settings and have many cross-race friendships.

Roughly half of the high school students are Jewish and a third are Protestant, the remainder being of several faiths or of unknown religious preferences. The school does not observe religious holidays and maintains a non-sectarian educational identity.

Student Purpose

The school has a long-standing reputation for academic excellence. All students take college preparatory courses, and all graduates go to college. Parents report that this is why they send their children to the school. There is some evidence that the quality of student preparation is high. Two of the 62 seniors were National Merit Scholarship winners, and the Eight Year Study (1943), found that graduates of this school were more intellectually curious, more interested in contemporary affairs, more emotionally mature, and more scientific and humanitarian than graduates of a matched public school.

The school curriculum was designed to interest students. The school offers courses in mathematics with a computer, independent study in a major research library, and courses about China, Latin America, war and peace, child development, and sexuality. There are many courses in the arts, and an environmental awareness course in which students rappel from sides of buildings, build rope bridges, administer first aid, use a compass, and locate urban resource centers. Student motivation in the more traditional academic courses is also high, and the school is a place where, in the words of one student, "...people carry books around that they don't have to read for courses, and read them because they are interested, and because they think there is something in them they want to find out." There is substantial pressure to get good grades, but many students come away with an honest belief in the intrinsic value of education.

A sociometric questionnaire was employed to check the value of academic achievement and college admission in the student subculture. Following Homans (1974), the personal characteristics of high status students were assumed to exemplify qualities generally valued by students in this school. The criteria for status could be inferred by examining the correlates of sociometric choices received, which represents direct peer evaluations. Unlike many public schools (Coleman, 1961), high sociometric status in this private school was positively associated with high achievement. In fact, the correlation of .36 between sociometric status and achievement was higher than all other correlations involving either of these variables. Also, seniors who were accepted into more selective colleges had higher sociometric status ($r = .35$). Student satisfaction was significantly correlated with sociometric status ($r = .29$), as well as achievement ($r = .30$). Also, students high in sociometric status had higher SES ($r = .19$), were absent less ($r = -.14$), and had parents who were more involved in school life ($r = .17$) than students with lower sociometric status. Although some of these correlations are low, their overall pattern is consistent. Taken together, they suggest that by placing a high value on achievement, student norms are highly congruent with formal school goals and the values of teachers and parents. The enthusiasm of this purpose occasionally exceeds its clarity, but it certainly includes a commitment to personal and academic growth.[4] Not surprisingly, the faculty become proselytizers too. Two teachers finished their Ph.D.'s while at the school, and several faculty are active in professional organizations.

Student Commitment

Participant observation in the role of a researcher-teacher suggested that three major characteristics of the school foster student commitment

to academic goals. First, the school functions as a warm, close, primary community. Second, the school provides a continuous range of experiences oriented toward the goal of college admission. Third, students exercise substantial power over teachers and their own school lives.

Primary Community

An important aspect of the school is its small size, which encourages face-to-face interaction among all students and teachers every day. The school is an active interpersonal environment and even the casual visitor cannot be in the building long before a student approaches and initiates a conversation. Students express every curiosity by finding someone with whom to share it. This involves overlapping sets of people in student initiated projects and transforms individual pursuits into collective tasks. The original idea is enriched by collective elaborations, and having been thrust into a public arena, becomes a matter requiring interpersonal negotiation among students.

Teachers and staff are accessible to students not merely in class, but throughout the day. Students can always find an appropriate adult to answer questions, and they are encouraged to do so. Teacher feedback helps students refine their ideas and stretch their cognitive perspectives, and posit still more sophisticated questions. Every student-teacher interaction, no matter how informal, manifests the dialectic of creative brainstorming and disciplined, sequential exposition. If instrumental, face-to-face communication between teachers and students is the heart of the educational process, then this school has wisely engineered what Strodtbeck (1965) has called a hidden curriculum.

The school is undermanned (Barker and Gump, 1964). There are not enough students to fully staff all activities. Because of constant peer pressures to help out in new activities, students become generalists rather

than specialists in one or two activities. Therefore students alternate between periods of frenetic activity and periods of total apathy, when they are "tired of living and breathing (the school)." Some students spend most of their free time at the school, even weekends and vacations. The principal had to intercede to keep them away during Thanksgiving and Christmas vacations when the school was officially closed.

The school is a primary community, and resembles a large, close family in many ways. One striking aspect is the stability and longevity of student cohorts. Of the high school students, 30% entered the school in junior or senior kindergarten and have been together 9 to 14 years. Another 29% entered in grades one through eight, and only 41% first entered the school during their high school years. Having grown up together, students know each other as well as siblings. Many students enjoy this special closeness, but some find it inhibiting or boring. Students complain of being burdened by reputations earned in the third grade which have become obsolete. Others want to meet new people. A small number rediscover their old friends as they gain insight into changes in both themselves and others. The continual recycling of old relationships can be both painful and exhilarating.

Students are like siblings in the fact that there is no dating of fellow students. Unlike typical public schools, one notes a lot of touching and diffuse libidinality, but little or no erotic play. Students say that since they know everyone so well, dating classmates is uncomfortable. Furthermore, the lurid exaggeration of student gossip inhibits many students' heterosexual behavior. Students do things in mixed-sex groups or with friends from other schools. There are several couples in the school who date openly but they are kidded mercilessly. Some couples use elaborate deceptions to hide their activities. One girl dated a boy secretly and ignored, even ridiculed him in school. Only when the relationship cooled

could she tell her girl friends about it.

The primary atmosphere of the school is reinforced by many actual kinship ties. Of the 498 families with children in the school, 30% have two children attending, 8% have three, and 2% have four children in the school. It is said among some families that to have another baby is to reapply for a space in the junior kindergarten class. Families with children already in the school get preferential treatment in the admissions process.

There are also generational bonds between students and alumni. Parents who graduated from the school value the opportunity to send their children there, particularly because the number of applications is several times the number of student openings each year. The student role tends to become a family heirloom, passed on from generation to generation. There are 44 families with children in the school in which a parent also graduated. Four families have attended the school for three generations.

There are also kinship ties between teachers and students. Of the 65 full and part-time teachers in 1975, 26% are parents of children who attended the school, and 12% of them are graduates of the school. Six husband-and-wife teams have taught at the institution and there are even two teachers who are graduates whose fathers taught there also. These relationships blur the distinction between teachers and parents in students' minds.

In this private school, students have higher seniority than teachers. Of the 65 teachers, 72% had been faculty members for six years or less. Only 14% of the teachers had taught at the school for 14 or more years. Teachers are evaluated annually and can be awarded a kind of informal tenure after about three years. However, few teachers get it because the

average teacher stays only 3.1 years at the school. Of the 46 teachers hired in the three years prior to the study, 67% are still at the school. However, of the 44 teachers hired four-to-six years prior to the study, only 27% are still faculty members.

One reason that 48% of the faculty are untenured is that it costs less. In 1975, full-time faculty salaries ranged from $9,288 to $16,727. By continually hiring new faculty at the low end of the scale, the school can pay its proven, tenured faculty at competitive rates. When it becomes clear to a new teacher that he or she is not going to get tenure, the low salary becomes an inducement to seek employment elsewhere.

The school is like a home to the extent that teachers are surrogate parents. In eighth grade, students choose advisors from the high school faculty, and meet with them at least once a week throughout their high school careers. The advisor is an ombudsman, a liaison between students, parents and teachers who helps plan and encourage students' academic progress. But, also, as one student put it, "it is nice to have an adult to talk to and confide in." Advisors are charged with the responsibility of always being available as a person students can trust and rely upon. One student's impression of advisors shows how important the advisor can be.

> While some advisors work during school hours only, others consider it a twenty-four hour job. At the risk of being devoured, many advisors have the courage to take whip and chair in hand and subdue that most dangerous of species, the hysterical parent. No educational institution could expect its faculty to make the kinds of commitment to its students, to take stock in them, and care for them, the way so many (of our) advisors do.

Advisors are often treated like parents but, unlike parents, are nearly always on the student's side. However, teachers must grade according to universalistic criteria of achievement. Although each grade report is supplemented by the teacher's description of a student's strengths and

weaknesses, and there are no class ranks because "they are too divisive," in a school in which college admission is the ultimate goal, grades are very important. This inherent conflict in the teachers' roles complicates students' dealings with them and guarantees that student-teacher interactions will be somewhat awkward, unsatisfying to students, and never totally predictable.

This is most apparent in student perceptions of the school principal. In the enactment of his role, the principal stresses the father-like aspects to the point that he is unobtrusive, almost furtive, when doing administrative tasks. Although he is open, he is discreet; although he is the friend of students, he is still the agent of their parents. His low profile and nonauthoritarian manner enhance the mystery of what transpires in the privacy of his office which is virtually the only place in school off-limits to uninvited students. Thus there is an enigma which, in student attempts to solve it, may have unanticipated developmental consequences. If the school were more clearly a school, or by becoming residential, were more clearly a family, then what was required of students would be more easily discerned and they would not have to create their own interpretation.

Besides cross-generational relationships with adults, students of mixed grade levels have regular contacts in several contexts. All classes except math, language and some of the arts meet twice weekly for 2 1/2 hour intensive sessions. Intensive courses originally included all high school students, but freshmen struggled to keep up while seniors were bored. Now, freshmen and sophomores take lower division intensive courses while juniors and seniors meet in upper division courses.

The image of the school as a primary community can be pushed too far. However, by being enough of a home to provide constant social support, the school is a secure base from which students can gradually disengage. In

fact, the gaps in the home-like atmosphere may constitute developmental obstacles which, in being overcome, prepare students to deal with impersonal, bureaucratic environments. It is clear that students appreciate the primary atmosphere during turbulent periods, realize that they will never again experience such an institution, and are ready to leave it by their senior year.

Continuity of Experience

The continuity of student experience in this school is represented in school history, and in the traditions and rituals which infuse school life.[5] A good example is the tradition of the schoolwide meeting. The entire school assembles three times a week for 40 minutes of announcements, musical productions, student projects, outside guests, and award ceremonies. It is the major community forum for people to share what they are doing. Because everything of consequence is eventually presented or commented upon in this assembly, it is a fascinating microcosm of the social dynamics of the school community.

This assembly fosters the continuity of personal and family history, of school tradition and personal growth, by igniting a spiral of communication. A ninth grade teacher commented on community reactions to a dramatic production staged by her Prose Fiction class. "For the next week, we received compliments and questions--from those who had previously worked with me, from those would would work with me, and from those who wanted to know more or just plain liked it." The same educational experiences are constantly recycled, which enables students to reinterpret them long after they have participated personally. The continuity of these experiences allows students to assimilate them at their own developmental pace.

Each student gets a unique opportunity to measure his or her own changing role in the school within the constancy of school tradition. The

second grader may see what he will become, a senior where he has been. Seniors' memories of participating in the assembly clearly show an awareness of their own development. As first graders, they trooped across the stage giving a perfunctory performance, unaware of what was happening. As fourth graders, the stark terror of standing in front of an audience was keenly felt. In the eighth grade they acted out their narcissistic bravado. Finally, with evidence of their past follies and individual triumphs echoed in every assembly, seniors demonstrate the more differentiated ability to work with their audiences to achieve the desired effects.

The institution of Big Brothers and Sisters supports interaction between grades. As Big Brothers and Sisters, seniors participate in picnics and games with students in the elementary school in a yearly festival. Having a senior as a friend makes underclassmen feel special and reaffirms the seniors' importance during the time they are preparing to graduate. The seniors also recapture their relationships with their faculty advisors, but with the roles reversed. Their passive dependence upon parental surrogates is replaced by activity in nurturant roles, at least symbolically, and provides public recognition of and the occasion for personal growth.

A set of community traditions has evolved from the continuity of student experience. These traditions are passed on largely by the students who, having seniority over teachers and administrators, are the authorities on school history. The sense of continuity exemplified by these traditions can be concretely physical. The halls of the school are lined with commemorative tiles. Each six-by-six inch tile includes the name of a supporter who donated $20 for the privilege, along with a colorful design painted by a fourth grade student. Originally a fund raising idea, students shyly admit to stealing secret looks at "their" tile. As one said, "It makes you feel like you've got one brick in the school."

Other traditions offer multiple levels of participation and meaning. The entire fourth grade year is devoted to the study of ancient Greece, which culminates in the annual Greek Play. In this production, students demonstrate their knowledge of ancient Greek music, drama, costumes, history, and science in roles they have created themselves. The Greek Play is typical of the academic demands made by the school community because it reflects the belief that "nothing is extraneous to the intrinsic movement of the school." The individual academic study of ancient Greece is transformed into a collective, participatory context. Even students who dislike school become involved in student decision-making requiring academic competence. In their eyes, it is no longer a school task, but their own.

The engaging quality of successful rituals extends beyond the activities involved. The sense of community which can develop in such focused gatherings has been described by Buber (1961) as

> ...the being no longer side by side (and one might add, above and below) but with one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from I to Thou.. (p. 51, original emphases)

By revealing community values at their deepest level in a participatory context, these rituals give the school a mission, a common purpose. Outsiders who come into the school are besieged with missionary zeal to convert. The usual act of fealty by incoming transfer students involves favorably comparing their new school to their old school in the student newspaper. As one student said, "(this school)...adopts people immediately into its Disneyland of animated characters and they have no choice but to jump on the bandwagon; quickly though, for things move at such a pace that one might miss it as it jingles by."

One function of rituals that is not well understood in the school is

that they provide a stage for the allegorical playing-out of status rivalries. Every year the juniors and seniors compete to have the best food concession at a spring festival. In a school assembly preceding the fair, each grade extols the virtues of its own concession and degrades the other in a skit designed to inflame the rivalry. Soon, raw chicken and hot dogs are being thrown about the stage, to the total delight of the audience. Throwing food at each other was, as Geertz (1973) has written about a different context:

> ...like playing with fire only not getting burned. You activate village and kinship rivalries and hostilities, but in "play" form, coming dangerously and entrancingly close to the expression of open and direct interpersonal and inter-group aggression (something which, again, almost never happens in the normal course of everyday life), but not quite because, after all, it is only a (food fight). (p. 440)

Instead of polarizing into isolated factions, rival student groups negotiate ways of acknowledging their differences while still maintaining contact. This preserves each student's freedom to associate with everyone else in the school.

Student Power

One striking aspect of the school is the control students have over their own school lives. For example, the curricular change to intensive courses radically increased students' input into course content and format. Because no teacher can lecture for three consistently interesting hours, they depend more on student participation. Because few students can remain anonymous in class for three hours, low participators get a chance to contribute. The school says that, "The teachers and students are emerging as people abundant with strengths and weaknesses and not living in prescribed roles." They should add that the one-sided dominance of the teacher in the classroom has diminished, giving students greater autonomy to pursue or discover their own academic interests.

Most public schools are deductive environments (Schroder, Driver and Streufort, 1967). They provide students with clear external criteria for both achieving and measuring success, and shape learning through rewards and punishments. Students are passive recipients of knowledge and grades are rewarded at least as much for good behavior as for achievement. This private school is closer to an inductive environment, in which students are entrepreneurs, developing their own ideas and trying to convince the community of their merit. Teachers are colleagues and consultants in this student-centered process, rather than arbiters of knowledge. The activity levels of students, and information exchanges between teachers and students, are much greater in the inductive school.

Students are given the freedom and the resources to try anything for which they can attract community support, from organic food in the cafeteria to building a new school greenhouse. The student government is given $3000 annually to spend on student projects, subject to no administration veto. Their decision-making process achieves a consensus on a creative and worthy expenditure in a fascinatingly subtle way. First, there is the tradition of school governments performing wisely in the past. Second, communication is required between peer groups to muster the consensus for a student government decision. There is evidence that students in key liaison roles between peer groups have higher levels of ego development than students whose friends are confined within a single peer group (Hansell, 1981). These mature students are probably disproportionately influential in the decision-making process. Their important roles in generating, communicating, and interpreting ideas in the student network probably reduce the impulsiveness of the final decision.

The school reaction to occasional failures of student projects reflects the respect for student autonomy and corporate responsibility that permeates

the school. The greenhouse is a typical case. The seniors decided to build a greenhouse as their graduation gift to the school. They worked feverishly to assemble the materials and construct the greenhouse before graduation. They did not finish in time, and their enthusiasm for completing the project waned after graduation. The unfinished greenhouse is praised and cherished as a symbol of initiative by the school community. In this school, individuals reap the credit when projects succeed, but when they fail no individual is blamed and the group still gets credit for trying. While the actual quality of much student work in this school is as flawed as in any other school, the community encourages its students to accept bigger challenges by de-emphasizing discrepancies between plans and actual products. Students who would not make the effort in a less supportive atmosphere occasionally produce superb work.

Students have an elaborate, almost utopian bill of rights. A student is guaranteed free speech, an uncensored press, the right to confront and cross examine any accuser, freedom from double jeopardy, and the right to privacy.[6] Students' lockers cannot, for example, be opened without either their permission or a search warrant signed by the principal. There are a few rules, of course, particularly against drug use, but students say "you can get away with flaunting teacher assignments, being tardy, just about everything." As a result, some parents are concerned about permissiveness in the school. In reality, however, much student activity is bounded by tradition and although students ignore trivial rules, they clearly understand the real taboos. Students must maintain appearances, avoid trouble with the police, and get good grades in school. Students also cannot question the legitimacy of community activities unless they label their intent as parody. Official disciplinary actions are rarely taken because they are rarely needed. The students seem to police themselves and if there is a problem, the principal or assistant principal has an informal

chat with the offending student.

Colson's (1974) concept of the traditional society is useful for understanding how social control is maintained in this private school. She investigated the intriguing paradox that in the absence of formal rules governing their behavior, people seek sources of restraint from within themselves. This process is accentuated in small, primary communities in which people cannot afford to let disagreement escalate into open conflict, because they must continue to associate with each other regardless of the outcomes. Such communities have elaborate face-saving rituals and maintain social control through gossip.

This private school is not as isolated as the primitive communities Colson studied, but similar self-regulating social controls are detectable. Consider the student newspaper. It is student run and financed, and is uncensored by the adults in the school. To fill 16 pages a week, the paper staff continually solicits articles, and virtually everything submitted to it gets printed. The paper is distributed freely to the entire school, and students avidly read it.

As a student editor wrote, "In a community as small and tight as (ours), the use of the printed word becomes a volatile issue." For adolescents, freedom of expression is one way to develop and reaffirm their identities. It is also "a genuine rush when you see your own pearls of wisdom immortalized on the printed page." Given the libidinal imperatives of adolescence, many articles display a good deal of emotional indulgence. Often the emotion is aggressive and is usually directed toward faculty and administration. Thus, a continual issue discussed in the paper is "Should we allow students to use the paper for whatever purpose they like, no matter how aggressive and destructive the article may be?" One case involved a series of gross caricatures of a faculty member, with clear

intent to riducule. For weeks afterward, students wrote rebuttals supporting the humiliated teacher and strongly criticizing the original student authors. From the student point of view,

> ...these things tend to work themselves out quite well. People are forced to take responsibility for their actions, as they know they will be judged by those reading the paper. At the same time, the author of any such article is being judged. If people feel that his attack is unwarranted, unconstructive, and malicious, he will feel the brunt of their angry reaction. In a situation in which everyone knows everyone else, the author cannot hide.

Since this incident, the barbs directed at teachers have moderated. However, the interesting fact is that no public apology was ever made to the teacher. The community criticized the vicious style of the insults rather than the fact that they were made. Apparently, teachers in this school are appropriate targets for the venting of student frustrations as long as the attacks are not too unseemly.

One might ask why the teacher in question did not use the authority of his position to defend himself. Teachers in this private school, unlike public schools, answer directly to parents for students' progress. Teachers who alienate parents directly on the cocktail party circuit, or indirectly through their sons and daughters in class, do not get tenure, or are simply asked to leave. The administration cannot shield teachers from parents because it implements just those policies representing a consensus of parents' wishes. Teachers have no certain allies in the school and their jobs depend largely on their popularity with a fickle student body.

Teachers are not powerless against the students in areas in which they are supported by parents. For example, the teachers flatly rejected a student proposal for a dance marathon, because of the extra work of supervising an around-the-clock activity. Parents did not like the idea of students wandering to and from the school all night. Interestingly, there were only faint murmurs of protest in the student newspaper about this

essentially unilaterial decision. Students apparently understood that their power ends at their parents' doorsteps. Once a school issue comes to the attention of parents, students are disenfranchised.

Paradoxically, it is the rarely exercised but ultimate control over the school by parents which creates the moratorium that gives students freedom to explore their opportunities and compels them to create a moral order within the student network. Because of contradictions and inconsistencies in every aspect of school life, theirs is a complex social as well as academic curriculum, one which is never fully mastered and which does not therefore severely limit the personal growth which can occur.

Thus, there is a curious asymmetry in the self-policing process. It is limited to student contacts with their peers, and teachers endure an inordinate amount of student abuse. Symptomatically, students do not lament the constraints on teachers' freedom of expression. But students get very upset when they are ridiculed without an opportunity to answer in kind. One student's reaction to bathroom graffiti, published in the newspaper, is an example.

> To whom it may concern; I am suggesting that people stop writing lies, rumors, and any other ugly comments about other students in the bathrooms...I'm quite sure that you would be very hurt by nasty words written about you or your friends...So who gives you the right to give others a bad name?

Colson's model of internal restraint applies only within the student community. The larger community is an open system in which students are valued more highly than teachers. Thus teachers--even good ones--are expendable. Teachers bear some of the costs of a school organization which makes them clients of the students.[7] The lessons of how and when to exercise power may prepare these students to assume their places among the elite, and may also serve a more general developmental function if the students gain an appreciation of the interdependencies of power relationships.

The 25% of the teachers who are parents of students in the school are less likely to be targets for the students' impulsiveness than other teachers. However, they are no more likely to get tenure. Ironically, parent-teachers are most likely to complain that their independence to teach the way they want is severely restricted. They are also among the staunchest supporters of academic rigor and loudly criticize the encroaching permissiveness which students demand.

Discussion

Previous research has suggested that student commitment and purpose may be a crucial difference between public and private schools. Participant observation in one private school indicated that active commitment to academic goals results from three features of school organization: a primary, face-to-face community; continuity of student educational experience, and students' power to affect their own school lives.

The intensive study of a single school limits the generalizability of the results. In particular, the specific causes of student commitment may differ in private schools with different histories, and in religious private schools. However, we would expect to find similar processes operating in elite, independent private schools of similar size. The generalizability of the commitment process identified here needs to be investigated in other types of private schools.

The larger intent of this paper has been heuristic, to stimulate thinking about how private schools work. The current debate over public versus private education has raised the possibility of improving public schools based on what we learn about private schools. However, this debate has become mired in issues of statistical analysis. We need to return to basic questions about the kinds of educational experiences available to students in private schools for further enlightenment.

Only about 10% of American students are enrolled in private schools (Nehrt, 1981), and it is realistic to expect that most children will continue to be educated in public schools. However, it may be possible to reorganize public schools to increase face-to-face student interaction in a primary community atmosphere, increase the sense of history and continuity in students' educational experiences, and increase students' control over some aspects of their school lives. Of course, we will need to select only those aspects of private schooling which can improve public education without unacceptable costs to teachers and school systems. Difficult policy issues must be addressed before these mechanisms of student commitment can be implemented in practical ways, but the urgent necessity of improving public school education in this country requires that these issues be explored further.

Notes

1. Coleman, et al. (1981), compared the educational outcomes of public schools, Catholic private schools, and other (non-Catholic) private schools.

2. Page and Keith (1981), for example, argued that the variables used by Coleman, et al. (1-81) to control for family background (parent education, occupation, income and home environment) were inadequate, and that their findings merely reflected the tendency of private schools to select the ablest and most fortunate students. For those interested in this controversy, special issues of the Sociology of Education (April, 1982) and the Harvard Educational Review (November, 1981) discuss the Coleman, et al. (1981) study.

3. My role as a researcher-teacher was somewhat different than the usual teacher role. My identity as a university researcher made me the focus of a lot of interest about research and provided me with easy access to nearly everybody in the school. At the same time, my identity as an outsider discouraged conversations about school gossip, although I was included in such discussions more often over my two years in the school. Not surprisingly, students were much more open and revealing than teachers.

4. This paper focuses on the academic goals of high grades and college admission because they most directly determine future occupational success and mobility. There are, of course, many other goals of education, such as ethical, moral or cultural development. Whether these goals are served by the mechanisms of student academic commitment identified in this paper is an empirical question for further research.

5. It is important to emphasize that in this school, the continuity of student experience is high, while the continuity of teacher experience

is low because of high teacher turnover. In the typical public school the converse is true; students are transients while teachers accumulate high seniority. This may be a fundamental difference between public and private school organization.

6. Many public school students have similar rights. However, student rights in many public schools are designed to protect students from abuses of teacher power. In this school, most student rights are designed to protect students from abuses of their peers.

7. This private school may be unusual in the extent of power students have over teachers, and I do not intend to suggest that abuse of teachers is a desirable or necessary correlate of student commitment to academic goals. It is, however, an extreme example of how this private school is organized for the convenience and interest of students rather than teachers. In contrast, the needs of strong teacher unions are given higher priority in most public school systems, sometimes to the detriment of student educational outcomes. Teacher burnout may be a significant hidden cost of the kind of private school organization described in this paper, which may have important policy implications for adopting features of private schools to public education. This is an issue which needs to be addressed directly in future research.

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