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ABSTRACT

Two strategies employed by school administrators to obtain compliance in public schools are examined in terms of their concrete expression in school rules regarding student behavior. Two kinds of rules are specified: comparative rules, which juxtapose some student behavior with an organizational response in an exchange relationship; and definitive rules, which are based on a well-defined image of the school as an institution that has a special social meaning and members with special identities. To investigate the use of definitive rules in public school settings, data from two originally separate studies--of an inner-city, predominantly black middle school and of a suburban upper-middle-class senior high school--were reanalyzed. In addition, interview and observation data from a teacher at another high school were reanalyzed to provide a close-up look at the use of definitive rules in a single classroom. The study concludes that, if comparative rules function to conserve commitment and definitive rules function to enhance commitment, both may be necessary for managing compliance in school organizations. (Author/MLF)

Managing Compliance in School Organizations
Comparative and Definitive Rules

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Managing Compliance in School Organizations:
Comparative and Definitive Rules

Current thinking on the structuring of schools and subsequent effects on teachers and students seems to contain conflicting suggestions. On the one hand, a number of investigators have noted the beneficial effects of schools with clear systems of rules and regulations governing students. The NIE Safe School Study concluded that strict enforcement of school rules and strict control of classroom behavior were associated with lower levels of school property loss. Further, student perceptions of strictly enforced rules were associated with low levels of student violence. (NIE, 1978) In their further analysis of some of the Safe School Study data, Gottfredson and Daiger (1979) concluded that:

> Additional evidence in our analyses suggests that when schools are run in clear, explicit ways, disruption is lower. When students reported that rule enforcement is firm and clear, or that the rules are fair and clear, their schools experience less disruption. Little evidence suggests that student participation in the generation of these rules is a necessary ingredient. The essential elements appear to be firm, clear, persistent, and even-handed application of rules. The results suggest, in short that misconduct should not be ignored but should be responded to in ways that students can anticipate, and in a way which separates responses to academic performance from responses to misconduct.

Implementing the strategy suggested here would involve the concerted effort of administrators and teachers to formulate explicit rules and disciplinary policies, to make these rules and policies known, and to ensure that these policies are adhered to. The rules must not only be clear, firmly enforced, and equitably administered, but they must also appear to be so to students. (pp. 169-170)

This position suggests that schools must be responsive to student behavior by creating systems of rules which clearly define the desired and undesirable behaviors and which clearly spell out for students the consequences of undesirable behavior.

On the other hand, observers of American schools have also noted the increasing bureaucratization of American education. Wise (1979) refers to this process as "hyperrationalization", the application of pseudo-rational or technical solutions to the problems confronting American educators. Wise argues that this phenomenon arises from over reliance on rationalistic and bureaucratic models of school organization. He presents the assumptions of the rationalistic model by including Corwin's (1975) list of assumptions underlying the model:

1. Organizations have clear-cut goals that are understood and subscribed to by the members.
2. Activities are planned.
3. Activities are closely coordinated.
4. The necessary information is available for making the informed decisions necessary to achieve the goals.
5. Officials have sufficient control over the

organization to ensure compliance with long-range plans.

Wise goes on to raise questions about these basic assumptions:

> Even these most basic assumptions are contradicted by the normal operation of schools. Schools do not have clear-cut goals that are understood and subscribed to by all. Goals are multiple, vague, general, and contradictory, and are given different interpretations by different school personnel who inevitably choose the goals to which they subscribe. School activities may be planned or unplanned; coordinated or uncoordinated. Information (scientific or other) to make informed decisions may or may not exist. And, so far, mechanisms of control in schools have not ensured compliance with long-range plans. (p. 89)

Wise continues by taking on the bureaucratic model as it might apply to schools. Again he cites Corwin's list of assumptions implicit in the bureaucratic model of organizations:

> Domination-subordination, the division of labor, clique structure, and group size are all concepts central to this model, although they are not unique to it. The bureaucratic ideal-type presumes goal consensus. Power is centralized, authority is based on expertise as well as incumbancy of office, there is close-knit coordination and extensive planning, and the components of organization are highly interdependent. Bureaucracies can be relatively autonomous and impervious to outside attempts to influence

them, although in a larger sense they are products of society.

Finally, Wise points out just how dramatically schools depart from this model:

> Consensus on goals is lacking. Formal power may be centralized, but its influence at the classroom level is attenuated. Authority residing in the administration tends to be based on position rather than special expertise; the scientific management movements have been a search for special expertise. Increasingly, analysts question whether schools are or can be closely coordinated, what the effects of planning are, and how interdependent the components of school organization are. (p. 90).

The rational bureaucratic model critiqued by Wise implies a strategy for securing the compliance of teachers and students with the goals of the public schools. The advice to create schools with clear rules and procedures is but one specific element of that rational bureaucratic model. Thus if we are to take seriously Wise's critque of the application of the rational bureaucratic model to schools, we must question the creation and elaboration of systems of rules and regulations in schools. The dilemma is how to construct a system to govern student and teacher performance that is at the same time clear and just without becoming overly bureaucratic and pseudo- or hyperrational.

This paper reports on two strategies employed by school administrators to obtain compliance in public schools. These strategies are examined in terms of their most concrete expression in

school rules for behavior and performance. Nearly twenty years before Wise's (1979) warning about the growth of pseudo-rational processes in school governance, Etizioni (1961, 1975) observed that public schools traditionally have relied on what he termed normative or moral bases to secure compliance and only secondarily on coercive rational bases. The present analysis considers school rules that are rationally based and pays particular attention to those which are normatively based. The former are referred to as comparative rules, while the latter are termed definitive rules.

Comparative and Definitive Rules

The use of comparative rules by teachers and administrators in schools involves the rational processes which have come to increasingly dominate the management of educational organizations. Rules are comparative in form when they juxtapose some student behavior with some organizational response, thereby defining the operating exchange relationship. Consider the rule:

> Students who are tardy for class more than three times must stay for detention one day for each time they are tardy.

This is a comparative rule. It a) specifies a student behavior or performance (Students who are tardy for class more than three times); b) specifies an organizational response (detention); and c) a rate of exchange (one day for each time they are tardy).

This rule gives students a clear notion of what kind of behavior is undesirable, and a clear idea of what they can expect if they engage in the behavior. As such it satisfies demands for clear

systems of rules for student conduct in school.

Definitive rules, in contrast to comparative rules, do not rely on the specification of negative student behavior, an organizational response, or an exchange relation. Instead, definitive rules are based on a well-defined image of the school as an institution with a special social meaning having members with special identities. Instead of comparing negative student performance with an institutional response, definitive rules define the institution and its members. Definitive rules avoid specifying a negative student performance by emphasizing the nature of performance characteristic of the organization and its members. Definitive rules avoid specifying a particular organizational response or penalty by emphasizing that the most important implication of failure to perform in a manner characteristic of the organization and its members is loss of membership. Finally, definitive rules involve no exchange formula.

Sources of Data

To further investigate the use of definitive rules in public school settings data from two originally separate studies was reanalyzed. The first study was designed to investigate the effects of the procedures used in the evaluation of teacher performance in six middle schools in the inner city of a large midwestern metropolitan area. (deCharms and Natriello, 1981) As part of the larger study, members of the research team spent at least one day a week in each of the schools observing principals, teachers, and students for a period of five months. The field notes from observations at one of the six middle schools, Darwin, are reanalyzed to examine the operation of

definitive rules.

The second study was designed to investigate the effects of the procedures used in the evaluation of student performance and behavior on student disengagement in four sururban high schools in the same major metropolitan area. (Natriello, 1982) As part of this study all of the administrators and 25% of the teachers were interviewed at each school. The data from one of these four schools, Washington High, are reanalyzed here. In addition, interview and observation data from one of the teachers at another of the four schools, Jefferson High, are reanalyzed to provide a close-up look at the use of definitive rules in a single classroom.

Living Together at Darwin Middle School

Darwin Middle School is an overcrowded predominantely Black middle school (grades 6 through 8) serving a lower class neighborhood in the inner city. At our initial observations Darwin appeared to be a school with few rules. For example, despite the movement of students required in a middle school of over 500 students, the principal of Darwin refrained from instituting a system of bells to regulate passing between classes, arguing that the teachers in the grade level teams should have the flexibility to work out their own arrangements regarding the length of periods and changing classrooms. The principal merely articulated the general goal of smooth quiet passing and let his subordinates work out arrangements. This particular example is indicative of the principal's general approach which is based on delegating responsibility to teachers whom he assumes to be competent.

This same approach extends to his dealings with students. The principal spent a great deal of time and effort setting up extracurricular activities designed to increase student pride in the school. For example, the school had a basketball team that played once a week, and the principal made sure they had uniforms and staff support. This was rare for middle schools in the district and contributed to the overall goal of creating a school that would be a special place.

In a letter to parents the principal wrote:

> The Darwin Middle School staff shares a great amount of enthusiasm and dedication of purpose to make our middle school the envy of our school system. It is our sincere hope that our zeal and enthusiasm will become contagious - affecting our students, parents, friends, and community alike.

The principal devoted a great deal of time and attention to activities designed to do just that, to make the school a special place, distinctive among the 23 middle schools in the city.

At the same time he took a more casual attitude to the kinds of traditional compliance processes recently emphasized by those interested in accountability. For example, the principal reported that he "does not really do observations" of teachers required as part of the district's evaluation procedures. Moreover, he noted that although he was supposed to evaluate probationary teachers every ten weeks (more frequently than non-proproationary teachers) he didn't find out who was probationary and who was not until well into the school year, past the initial ten week period. Teachers confirmed

this report, noting that he really left them alone.

The principal also adopted a fairly casual attitude in regard to standardized testing of students, another accountability measure receently emphasized. At one point he noted that if he really pressured teachers about standardized test scores they would only cheat.

Despite the principal's casual attitude toward comparative rules and compliance measures, he set clear directions for student performance. He told a story that illustrated his approach:

> One day I followed a group of eighth graders on their way home. On the way I saw them get into a fight. The next day I visited their classroom to talk to them about it and told them "maybe we don't need an eighth grade program for graduation." After this a little girl spoke up, "Mr. Darst, I ride the bus." I simply replied, "We live together, we die together."

He emphasized this kind of group or collective responsibility in many of his dealings with students. It was consistent with his stress on the school as a special place and the students as special people by virtue of their shared membership in the school.

Darwin Middle School enjoyed relatively high student attendance and reasonably good student test scores given the difficult group of students. The approach of the principal illustrates at the middle school level some of the practices that we refered to as definitive rules, stressing the identity of the school and its students, while placing less reliance on individual accountability through defining the exchange of behavior for sanctions.

Setting Expectations at Washington High School

Washington High School is one of four senior high schools in a large suburban school district in a major midwest metropolitan area. The school serves an upper middle class community and is generally regarded as one of the leading public schools in the area. The students at Washington perform above the national means in both the verbal and math sections of the Scholastic Aptitude Test and over two-thirds of the students plan to continue their education beyond high school.

Administrators and teachers interviewed at Washington were quick to point out that the school places very little emphasis on rules and regulations like those identified here as comparative rules. Instead administrators at the school rely on a model of what they refer to as the "teacher as a professional." Administrators argued that a great many specific rules take the onus off the teachers. One of the teachers spoke instead of guidelines and the principal's expectations and explained that "You're hired cause you're good, the best, a professional" and you receive "professional respect."

As part of this model of the teacher as a professional, teachers are very involved in constantly defining criteria and standards for students. Administrators and teachers alike reported that this function was very actively performed by the various departments under the direction of department chairpersons. Noting this, an administrator added, "I don't want an Army manual." Teachers appeared to work hard and to be very involved in trying to develop shared conceptions about appropriate student performance.

The primary strategy for obtaining student compliance was

described by administrators and teachers as "setting expectations." This process is viewed as distinctly different from establishing rules and regulations like those we have termed comparative. For example, one administrator argued that:

> A big mistake is defining behavior. People tend to gravitate toward a minimal acceptable behavior. It's important for us to use nebulous expectations, to deal in generalities.

Another administrator described this as a process of not specifying minimum behavior and just setting high standards. A specific illustration was provided by a teacher who told of a student misbehaving in the hall.

> There is no written policy. If a student is not doing what's expected in the hall, the student is told, "that's not expected."

An important feature of this strategy of "setting expectations" appears to be discussing those expectations without mentioning consequences. This is in contrast to the form of comparative rules which specify the consequences of student misbehavior. One teacher explained that the policy was to emphasize expectations and a positive attitude in the entire school. Another teacher added that the "administration accents the positive to the point where the kids don't believe it, but try to live up to it just to hear it."

The standards for performance were quite high. One teacher, while discussing standards, noted that "the administration does not like to set rules, but they want it understood." Still another teacher spoke of a "hidden message" from the administration: "don't

take any crap, don't tolerate it."

The strategy of setting expectations appeared over and over again in our interviews at Washington High. This strategy is unwritten. There is no student handbook. But a variety of activities serve to convey it. Administrators pointed to class meetings at the start of the year and school-wide meetings with students. They also discussed an annual review of their approach to students conducted by administrators in August. They noted that faculty input was encouraged in this process. One administrator explained that this approach has evolved slowly in the 13 years since the opening of the school.

The process of setting expectations used by the administrators at Washington High is usually quite subtle but understood. The various characteristics of this approach are illustrated in an announcement read on December 18, 1980 by the principal to the students of Washington High over the intercom:

> This evening and tomorrow evening...Washington High will present its Thirteenth Annual Christmas Choral Concert...All of you are invited to attend.
>
> This program is always a highlight...First, because of its quality -- and second, because of the special audience that attends.
>
> More Washington graduates come back for the Christmas Program than almost any other event...Some graduates, and some parents, who will be here have seen all of the previous thirteen concerts. (No other activity has this holding power year after year.)

Because of the nature of the choral presentations -- and because of the make-up of the audience...a special atmosphere is needed.

With that in mind -- and so Washington students who are performing will be able to do their very best work -- I'd like to ask for your help.

If you attend the Chirstmas Choral Concert -- and are sitting in the bleachers next to...or close by... students from the junior high schools or elementary schools -- please take it upon yourself to ask them to remain absolutely quiet -- and to not leave and return during the program.

Ask them to meet the Washington standard of dignity that you have established so well.

This message to the students presents a clear image of standards associated with a special school and its special students, members in the school.

The approach taken by the administrators and teachers at Washington High is heavily reliant upon what we have identified as definitive rules. It avoids whenever possible the type of rules and regulations we have labeled comparative. Although this approach seems to be quite successful in encouraging student compliance, it is not without its dangers. As the principal put it, "If we ever had to go to court, we would lose."

Becoming a Professional with Mrs. James

Mrs. James was the theatre teacher at Jefferson High School,

another of the four high schools in the suburban district where Washington High was located. Mrs. James taught both acting and stage production classes and directed the theatre program of the school. As she explained, she ran a "production oriented program." Mrs. James enjoyed great autonomy at Jefferson High and had the "trust of the administration." Students took her classes as elective, and she thus had control over their entry into her program. As she put it, "if they skip once or twice they are out. I don't have to have them."

Aside from this rule, Mrs. James mentioned no rules and regulations when we first spoke with her. However, as we spoke with her further when we returned to observe her and interview her again, an interesting pattern emerged. Despite the lack of any comparative rules relating student performance to a teacher or school response, there were very clear rules of the definitive sort.

These definitive rules revolved around the concept of a "professional" in the theatre as projected by Mrs. James. When we asked about regulations regarding student behavior particularly in settings like the theatre and the stagecraft shops, Mrs. James replied that the only thing she communicated to students was to "Be a Professional." She added, for example, that, "No actor yells at another actor." Later she observed that in theatre work it is important for "everybody to know their job and what to do." for things to work properly. Since she structured the schedule so that students were in some kind of performance every two weeks, the audience or potential audience was a great force in compelling students to perform and behave to their best ability. In addition, she noted that "in the theatre the whole person is looked at everyday."

Mrs. James also discussed the importance for actors and theatre students to learn to follow the orders of a director. She appointed student directors for each project and expected other students to take direction well. Again, she stressed that this was part of the professionalism of an actor.

Finally, Mrs. James explained that since the theatre classes always involved group projects on productions and a great deal of cooperation, there was a considerable amount of peer pressure on students to perform and behave well. She described her classes as forming a "cohesive" and "very loyal" group.

Managing Through Comparative and Definitive Rules

Our review of these three examples of the use of definitive rules permits us to note more specifically the differences between definitive rules and comparative rules. Figure 1 presents these differences in terms of six dimensions.

Figure 1 About Here

The first dimension, audience, refers to the target of the rules. Comparative rules take the individual as a target, while definitive rules focus on the collective as a target. This is closely related to the second dimension, subject, which refers to the content of the

rules. Comparative rules focus on undesirable or non-compliant performance, while definitive rules focus on desirable or compliant performance. Because comparative rules are concerned with non-compliant performance they must focus on non-complying individuals. Definitive rules concerned with compliant performance concentrate on the normative performance of the collective.

The third dimension, form, refers to the appearance or implementation of rules in organizations. Comparative rules take a specific form, generally in writing. Definitive rules are more diffuse, known by most all members, but nowhere concretely evident.

The fourth dimension, sanctions, refers to the nature of the rewards and penalties associated with compliance and non-compliance with a rule. The sanctions for definitive rules are liminal, that is, they involve the boundaries of membership in the organization. The negative form of the sanction involves diminuition or loss of membership in the organization, while the positive form involves enhancement of membership. The sanctions for comparative rules are non-liminal, they do not involve the boundaries of membership. The negative form of the sanction involves a specific penalty. The positive form involves the absence of the specific penalty. Neither carries implications for organizational membership.

The fifth dimension, responsibility, refers to the extent to which individuals in organizations are required to make non-trivial decisions regarding the order of the organization. Comparative rules require individuals to make relatively few non-trivial decisions. Definitive rules, as pointed out by the administrators at Washington High, require individuals to assume greater responsibility and

participate in making relatively more non-trivial decisions regarding the order of the organization.

The sixth dimension, flexibility, refers to the extent to which managers of the organization can react to changing circumstances by changing the rules. Systems of comparative rules constrain managers from making such changes, while definitive rules permit considerable flexibility.

These differences between comparative and definitive rules suggest several reasons why school administrators might shy away from employing elaborate sets of comparative rules. First, administering comparative rules and regulations quickly becomes a complicated business and takes a great deal of administrative time. For example, determining sanctions that are appropriate for specific acts of non-compliance and that fit appropriatly in a system of rules dealing with many acts of non-compliance is a complicated and time-consuming task. Of course, if the time it takes to handle every problem on an exception basis is great; then instituting comparative rules may result in a savings of administrative time. If an organization can maintain a community of consensus among participants and keep the number of exceptions low, it is likely to be less time consuming to deal with specific incidents one by one than to administer an elaborate set of rules and procedures.

A second factor which appears to play a role in the avoidance of comparative rules is the nature of many school and student tasks. Unlike tasks in production organizations, many school tasks are not completely visible. This is particularly true for academic tasks where student work often takes place in the minds of students

(Natriello and Dornbusch, 1980). But it is also true for student behavior where administrators and teachers often have incomplete information on the flow of behavior. As Galbraith (1973) notes, rules are useful where activities are repetitive and predictable, standard. They are less useful where activities are more complex and subject to change. In such cases rules may inhibit the necessary re-planning in reaction to changing conditions. This need is often expressed by educators as a need to give students and their problems personal and individual attention and treatment. Non-educators sometimes view this approach as emotional or soft-headed. However, the approach may stem more from the nature of school and student tasks than from any sense of emotional attachment to individual students. School tasks are often too complex to be handled with great dispatch according to specifically pre-programmed rules.

The Effects of Comparative and Definitive Rules

Thus far we have suggested that school administrators might avoid creating elaborate systems of comparative rules and instead place some emphasis on definitive rules because the latter are often easier to manage and may be more flexible in responding to the relative unpredictibility of school tasks. Comments by the administrators at Washington High support this argument.

In this section we speculate on the likely effects of comparative and definitive rules on students as members of the school organization. Neither of our studies provides data on this issue. However, we can develop certain arguments that might be examined in future studies.

In examining the management of compliance in educational organizations, we are examining some of the processes which serve to connect individuals to formal organizations. A large number of studies utilizing a wide variety of approaches have examined the factors which connect individuals to organizations. (Angle and Perry, 1981; Vroom, 1964; Hrebiniak and Alutto, 1972; Buchanan, 1974; Porter, et al., 1974; Kanter, 1968, Hirshman, 1969) As Angle and Perry (1981) point out, the dominant paradigm in this area of organizational research and theory views organizations and their members in an exchange relationship. The organization and member each require certain things of the other while providing something in return. It is this kind of thinking that underlies the analysis of organizational factors related to school crime and violence in the Safe School Study. This study, like most of the research based on the exchange paradigm tends to emphasize the problems of alienation and disengagement of members from the organization.

The policy implications of such research typically take the form of improving the rational features of organizations in order to reduce the alienation and disengagement of members. Indeed, improved systems of comparative rules and other rational measures may halt the decline in commitment and sense of membership in school organizations. Schools perceived as just may force fewer students to become alienated than schools perceived as unjust.

What the literature on such rational features of organizations, including schools, seems to omit is consideration of the process by which members may become more committed to organizations. Strategies for enhancing commitment or membership may be crucial to managing

compliance in schools and other organizations where tasks and performance requirements are complex and unpredictable. An administrator at another of the four suburban high schools which had been open only five years spoke of "creating enough student loyalty to make it managable." The use of definitive rules may lead to enhanced commitment among students and other members of organizations.

Conclusions

If comparative rules function to conserve commitment and definitive rules function to enhance commitment, both may be necessary for managing compliance in school organizations. An approach to managing compliance which mixes both kinds of rules may be more successful in achieving success and may avoid the kind of hyperrationalization noted by Wise.

Successful school administrators may have developed an approach to managing compliance characterized by what we have termed definitive rules because of the tasks that schools attempt to accomplish. A substantial part of school administration involves the management of what Dornbusch and Scott (1975) have referred to as active tasks, tasks low in goal clarity, predictability, and efficacy. The use of traditional comparative rules is unlikely to be successful in such environments (Galbraith, 1973) and may result in hyperrationalization. As other organizations shift from less active tasks of material production to more active tasks of information management and transfer, managers may profit from the approaches adopted by educational administrators who have succeeded by combining the use of comparative and definitive approaches to obtaining compliance.

Figure 1

Dimensions of Differences Between Comparative and Definitive Rules

Dimension	Comparative Rules	Definitive Rules
Audience	Individual	Collective
Subject	Undesirable Performance (Non-Compliance)	Desirable Performance (Compliance)
Form	Specific	Diffuse
Sanctions	Non-Liminal	Liminal
Responsibility	Minimized	Maximized
Flexibility	Minimized	Maximized

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