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## ABSTRACT

Pennsylvania's Philadelphia School District implemented an action plan that mandated establishment of small learning communities (SLCs) in all schools. SLCs were intended to increase teacher professionalism and effectiveness by bringing decision making power to the local level. This paper examines how two elementary schools' SLCs implemented decision making using the Comprehensive Support Process (CSP), which was intended to shift responsibility and accountability directly to teachers. Using structuration theory as a conceptual framework, this study investigated factors affecting the empowerment and transformative capacity of participants in the process. Structuration provides a comprehensive paradigm of agency, offering insights into how actors structure their environment through praxis. A structural perspective conceptualizes organizational structure, power, and legitimacy as produced and reproduced through the agency of participants. The structure of a social system is therefore both its medium and outcome. Data collection involved teacher interviews, observations, and document analysis. Viewed through the duality of structure, results indicated that implementation of the CSP gave teachers little control or choice in their decision making. Teachers often found themselves either asking for permission or using their meeting time to follow procedures rather than make decisions. Consequently, the decision making process was seldom empowering or effective. (Contains 60 references.) (SM)

# Searching for Empowerment: The Structuration of Decision-Making Groups in Urban Schools

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## Abstract

Searching for Empowerment: The Structuration of Decision-Making Groups in Urban Schools  
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In an effort to bring systemic reform to its schools, the School District of Philadelphia implemented an action plan called Children Achieving. As part of his agenda the superintendent mandated the establishment of small learning communities (SLCs) in all schools. The SLCs were intended to increase the professionalism and effectiveness of teachers in the schools by bringing decision-making power to the local level. This paper is a case study of how two elementary schools' SLCs implemented decision-making in a specific forum called the Comprehensive Support Process (CSP). The CSP was the School District's response to newly enacted State and Federal laws affecting the evaluation and placing of students in special education programs. The intention of the CSP was to shift responsibility and accountability directly to teachers, who were most familiar with the needs of the students.

Using Structuration theory as a conceptual framework, this study offers a interpretative investigation of factors affecting the empowerment and transformative capacity of participants engaged in this process. Structuration provides a comprehensive paradigm of agency, offering insights into how actors structure their environment through praxis. A structurational perspective conceptualizes organizational structure, power, and legitimacy as produced and reproduced through the agency of participants; the structure of a social system is therefore both its medium and outcome.

Viewed through the duality of structure, this study concludes that the implementation of the CSP, as practiced in the schools, gave teachers little control or choice in their decision-making. Teachers often found themselves either engaged in

asking for permission or using their meeting time to follow procedures rather than make decisions. Consequently, the decision-making process was seldom empowering or effective and did not reflect the intentions of the reform program.

Rather than blame the failure of reform efforts on "teacher resistance" or "subversion," policy-makers and change agents might profit from an in-depth understanding of how social systems construct meaning and purpose. The evaluation of a change program may not be valid if it uses adherence to procedures or participant satisfaction as measures of success. Researchers should examine how the praxis of participants produces the structuration of the social system. It is possible to observe behaviors that outwardly appear to reflect change but lack validity because they are not genuine. Structuration theory offers an insightful perspective of agency and transformative capacity that allows researchers to make sense of the interaction of communication, resources, role expectations, and normative rules of the social system.

It is only through the interaction of social members that beliefs and procedures are given meaning (signification), attain a consistent level of practice (domination), and ultimately are accepted as worthwhile rules and procedures (legitimation). If members see rules and procedures as something imposed on them from an external source, they are less likely to view these as legitimate and worthwhile practices. Unless participants are able to achieve their transformative capacity and develop their own praxis there is little reason to expect lasting and meaningful change in the social system.

Joseph W. Showalter Ph.D.

Searching for Empowerment: The Structuration of Decision-Making  
Groups in Urban Schools

Introduction

Traditionally, teachers have participated in decision-making in an advisory capacity; they were asked to make suggestions but rarely had any power over the making of the ultimate decisions (Conley, 1989; Dunlap and Goldman, 1991; Keith, 1996; Weiss, Cambone, & Wyeth, 1992). Recent efforts to implement shared decision-making as part of the organizational structure within the context of urban elementary schools represent a significant departure from this paradigm (Burpitt & Bigoness, 1997; Hannay & Ross, 1997; Kushman, 1992). The shift to shared responsibility requires that social actors rethink issues of participation, power, authority, and control (Bredeson, 1993; Murphy, 1993; Newmann, King, & Rigdon, 1997; Smylie & Bownlee-Conyers, 1992).

Implementers of restructuring efforts in urban schools promote shared decision-making as one of the primary means of achieving systemic change. Reformers argue that giving teachers more voice in decision-making and greater authority will help school districts attract and retain the best teachers and encourage innovation. Ultimately, they argue, these shifts in authority structures will improve the achievement of students (Cibulka, 1997; Fine, 1994, 1998; Kushman, 1992; Newmann et al., 1997; Sandidge, Russo, Harris, & Ford, 1996).

One reason that restructuring efforts fail is the inability of social actors to recognize the inner dependence factors within the social system (Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand & Flowers, 1997; Foley, 2001; Hallinger & Hausman, 1994). As Felner, et al., conclude: “. . . we must understand that schools are

complex, integrated systems. Therefore we must address the full set of operational norms, regularities, and behaviors that may impact or undermine efforts at change (p. 65).” Having said this, the difficult issue is how we understand the innerworkings of the organization. This is particularly important in the context of systemic school reform.

In Philadelphia, the establishment of small learning communities (SLCs) in all elementary schools was intended to increase the professionalism and effectiveness of teachers in the schools. Teachers in SLCs were expected to make decisions regarding the establishment of instructional strategies, academic student support services, budget recommendations, and even disciplinary strategies (Christman, Foley, & Passantino, 1998; Fine, 1998; School District of Philadelphia, 1995; Zane, 1994).

But do such programs that promise greater teacher empowerment, authority, and accountability really meet these criteria? Do teachers and administrators possess enough knowledge of the process, and of each other, to make shared decision-making meaningful and productive? Do teachers have the opportunities and promised resources that would allow them to make a difference in their schools? Do they view themselves as empowered agents? Most importantly in the context of this study, to what extent are teachers able to recognize their own *transformative* capacity?

Structuration theory, the theoretical perspective for this research project, provides an interpretive view and offers insights demonstrating the process through which social actors’ praxis structures their environment. It is my contention that organizational structure, power, and legitimacy are produced and reproduced through the agency of participants. Through their interaction

they have at least as much influence on the social system and on how change initiatives are implemented as do directives for compliance issued by administrators (Fullan, 1993; Malen, 1994).

The purpose of my study was to find ways of understanding the dynamics of organizational change and factors that promote or inhibit the transformational capacities of agents in the social system. In other words, practices that enable social actors to establish and participate in ways that promote meaningful and lasting changes in praxis. I was also interested in finding ways to use theory as an interpretative tool for evaluation of program implementation.

### Theoretical Framework

This study presents an interpretative analysis of participants' experiences of participation, agency, and democratic processes using Anthony Giddens' structuration theory as a conceptual framework (Cohen, 1989; Craib, 1992; Giddens, 1979, 1984, 1993, 1995; Thompson, 1989). Other studies of school restructuring and teacher teams and communities have focused on a variety of issues: leadership and motivation (Blase, 1993; Kasten, Short, & Jarmin, 1989); the effects that teacher teams have on the larger school organization (Firestone, 1996; Kruse & Louis, 1997); issues of authority and participation (Conley, 1989; McNeill & McNeill, 1994); organizational capacity and accountability (Newmann et al., 1997); and how school social and instructional foci facilitate the socialization of teachers working in teams (Kasten, Short, & Jarmin, 1989; Westheimer, 1998). Such studies provide detailed descriptions of the problems and successes of teacher-teams or communities as organizational or social structures. The information contained in these studies is useful and has helped frame the

argument for the present study. These studies view structure as something external to the social system which can be changed through the implementation of change agents. Structuration theory maintains that all agents are knowledgeable and through their actions produce the structure of a social system. In other words, the structure of the society is formed through actions *within* the social system. Structuration theory offers a way of identifying internal enabling and constraining factors in a social system and thereby offers insights which may help us understand the inner workings of restructuring efforts.

Structuration provides an alternative perspective for investigating the roles participants play in the context of reform implementation. When reform agendas are not successful, evaluations often cite teacher resistance and lack of participation as impediments to change initiatives (Christman, Cohen, & Macpherson, 1997; Fullan, 1993; Weiss, 1995). To overcome these obstacles a number of strategies have been proposed including the following: improving interpersonal communication and information distribution (Kasten, Short, & Jarmin, 1989; Short & Greer, 1993); clarification of goals (Newmann et al., 1997); and establishing a culture of trust within the school (Blase, 1993; Blase & Blase, 1994; Fullan, 1993). Certainly, these are all essential issues that need to be considered, but as Fullan (1993) maintains, mandating priorities from above does not work; change comes only from the action of individuals. Therefore, a critical assessment of a change program must look beyond the expressed intentions of designers. Such an assessment should be concerned with the extent to which all actors are provided equal opportunities to influence the change process and the degree to which the actual practices of social actors and outcomes match the intention of reformers.



This requires that we look directly at how actors assign meaning to events and construct their own reality (Geertz, 1983; Giddens, 1979, 1984; 1993 Hamel, 1993). The intention of this study was to explore how participants responded to a change effort through agency and the use of the resources available to them. The study draws attention to the points of agreement and contradiction that may facilitate reflexive understanding of the perspectives of all participants and how this information can be used to evaluate and inform policy.

According to structuration theory, agency and structure are conceptualized as interdependent aspects of group life rather than separate or external factors in a social system. Participants produce and reproduce the structures of their social system through interaction and the use of rules and resources. Social structure is therefore both the medium and the outcome of social interaction rather than a separate construct that restrains participants (Cohen, 1989; Giddens, 1979, 1984, 1993; Outhwaite, 1990).

Figure 1. illustrates the monitoring capacity of agents within the duality of structure. Agents are in a constant process of monitoring and remonitoring their own and other actors' behavior. Cohen (1989) provides a cogent explanation of this model that has significant implications for the analysis of social systems.

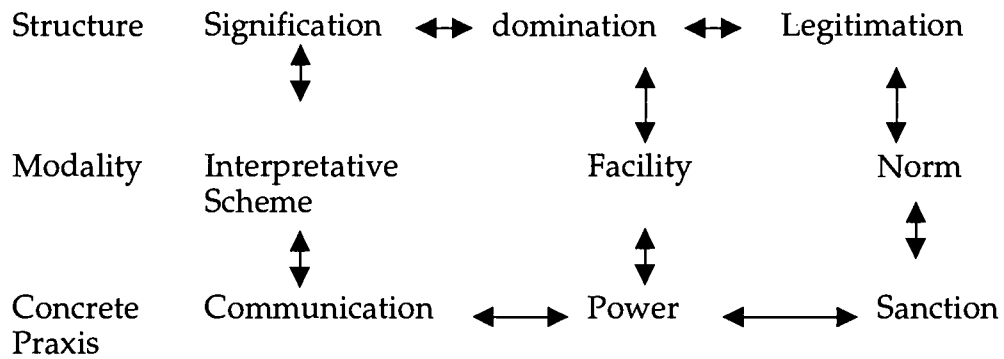


Figure 1. The Duality of Structure. (Adapted from Structuration Theory: Anthony Giddens and the Constitution of Social Life. (p. 241), by I. J. Cohen, 1989. New York: St Martin's Press).

Cohen prefers the term “concrete praxis” for what Giddens calls “interaction.” He asserts that this terminology allows for activities that agents may undertake that are other than face-to-face.

The modality of interaction refers to the inherent relationships between rules and resources that members establish within their social system. Giddens (1979; 1984) maintains that rules and resources cannot be considered separately, or outside of the context of the social system. Rules are not simply directions, or advice on “how to act.” It is best to understand that rules and resources, taken together, constitute the structure of society. The actions of participants shape the nature of transformative capacity, and hence the power of actors. Giddens (1979) explains: “social systems are constituted as regularised practices: power within social systems can thus be treated as involving reproduced relations of autonomy and dependence in social interaction. Power relations therefore are always two-way, even if the power of one actor or party in a social relation is minimal compared to another” (p. 93).

## The Dialectic of Control

The dialectic of control is Giddens' term for the ability of less powerful members to influence the social system. It is highly unlikely, especially in large, bureaucratic environments such as urban schools, that actors view power as a symmetrical component. In fact, a primary feature of bureaucratic systems is asymmetrical power relationships (Cohen, 1989; Giddens, 1979, 1984; Layder, 1985).

Power in society is, in Giddens' (1984) terms, ". . . the means of getting things done and, as such, directly implied in human action" (p. 283). The idea of power struggle can be understood here as the dialectic of control. In Giddens' view, even those in weaker positions of established power relationships can manipulate power in a way that influences those with greater resources.

Given this conception of agency and resources, power is not regarded as a separate resource, but rather as a product of the interaction among social actors. Giddens asserts that it is possible for actors to exercise power without consciously doing so. This is because as knowledgeable agents, actors are familiar with what works to get them what they want in the social system. Another aspect that must be considered in this context is the subject of unintended consequences of social action.

Just as actors are able through agency to produce and reproduce the desired outcomes of actions, the duality of structure may also involve unintentional reproduction of unacknowledged structural conditions (Cohen, 1989; Giddens, 1984, 1993). This is not to say that at some point these conditions will never become conscious. Cohen (1989) explains:

It is entirely consistent with the status of structuration theory as an ontology of potentials that what may be for agents unintended consequences and unacknowledged conditions of action over a given historical period, may thereafter become discursively acknowledged by agents as ongoing outcomes of and conditions for their own social conduct. This potential is linked directly to possibilities for social change, in so far as agents who come to realize that their activities contribute to the maintenance of an oppressive or otherwise undesirable set of social institutions may thereafter begin to initiate measures to alter their previous forms of conduct, depending upon available opportunities in situ. (p. 55)

Table 1 summarizes the basic conceptual argument of structuration theory. Structural properties are both medium and outcome of the social system.

Table 1. Structuration

Structure(s)	System(s)	Structuration
Rules and resources, or sets of transformation relations, organized as properties of social systems	Reproduced relations between actors or collectives, organized as regular social practices	Conditions governing the continuity or transmutation of structures, and therefore the reproduction of social systems

Stated another way, social systems are produced and reproduced through the interactions of agents in their social system. These actions are in turn determined by rules and resources available to agents. Factors which contribute either through enabling or constraining actions are determined by the position roles and conditions of social interaction. Since the roles and routines are not necessarily completely controlled, the structuration of a social system is subject to changes that may be subtle or may have a broader and more radical impact on the social system. Social systems constantly evolve through the agency of actors.

The action of agents is determined by the resources available to them and the consequences, either intended or unintended, of previous action.

Agency is conceptualized as a function of the degree to which actors are able to negotiate the social systems through their knowledge of the rules and resources of the social system. All action is purposive, but actors do not need to be conscious of all the factors that determine their actions. The set of rules embedded into the practices of society that guide day-to-day interaction is called practical consciousness. Members may not be fully able to articulate these rules, although they can usually give some explanation for their actions. Additionally participants engage in discursive consciousness, the ability of actors to monitor not only the behavior of others, but the monitoring itself. In other words, social actors are engaged in a continual evaluation and reevaluation of behavior used in the social system (Cohen, 1989; Giddens, 1979, 1984, 1993; Thompson, 1989).

We can see how actors adjust their interactions to the situation at hand. For example, when actors are in dispute over a particular issue, both parties will adjust their behavior so as to either resolve the issue or purposely provoke further conflict. The continuous interaction shifts the nature of behavior and, over a period of time, establishes new policies or norms for future action. The important factor in this process is that it is continuous, and new norms go through this process before becoming an established policy or belief.

In the context of urban elementary schools, the familiar patterns of social interaction establish different levels of agency for members, depending upon their role position in the social system. In the context of an educational setting, a principal has far greater access to information and resources than the average teacher. Similarly, more experienced teachers generally have a higher level of

knowledge than a less experienced ones and, therefore, a significantly greater ability to affect their environment.

### Methods

In the presentation of research findings, it is important to consider the contrasting viewpoints of members in a given social system. Naturally, different actors may see a given situation from completely different perspectives (Guba, 1985; Lincoln, 1985; Metz, 2000). The only way to obtain these unique perspectives is to go directly to the participants for data. A case study design was deemed the most appropriate way to obtain participants' perceptions for several reasons. First, urban elementary schools are generally designed as rational, authoritarian, bureaucratic systems with their own set of rules and regulations (Bacharach & Mundell, 1993; Tyack, 1974; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). As such, they may be considered bounded systems (Gillham, 2000; Lincoln, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994). Second, case studies enable the researcher to present a thick description of events and perceptions of social actors within that context (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 1994; Fetterman, 1989; Guba, 1985; Lincoln, 1985; Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994). Although schools have set rules and procedures, the agency of actors and the dynamic nature of interaction often create situations in which behavior is unpredictable. Taken together, these factors create situations whose variables are beyond the control of any investigator. Such situations are best addressed through a case study design (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994). Third and finally, structuration theory is best used as a method to investigate the production and reproduction of the social practices of social actors who possess a mutual understanding of that social system (Cohen, 1989; Giddens, 1979; 1984, 1993). This "fit" between case study and

structuration theory has been demonstrated by other researchers (Hancox, 1997; Witmer, 1998).

### Data Sources

Two groups of teachers from each of two urban elementary schools in Philadelphia participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher were the primary source of data. Twenty-nine teachers in the two schools volunteered to participate in the study. Other sources included researcher observations, minutes of meetings, and official school documents. A central feature of structuration theory is the concept of knowledgeable social actors. The researcher must approach the process of collecting data from participants with the view that their accounts actually do reflect their understanding of reality (Denzin, 1989; Maxwell, 1996).

Geertz (1983) argues that understanding a society comes from an understanding of how society understands itself. The present study used the perceptions of informants as a basis for organizing and categorizing data into themes for analysis. Statements were compared and contrasted to determine themes. Once the themes were identified, they were categorized according to processes related to decision-making process. Categories included information sharing, participation, role positions, and social support. Within these categories, dimensions of structuration theory were used to interpret and analyze the data. Triangulation between data sources and member checks were used as measures to ensure validity.

### Decision-Making and the Comprehensive Support Process

This paper focuses on a specific aspect of decision-making in the context of the SLCs that participated in this study. The Comprehensive Support Process

(CSP) was the School District's response to newly enacted State and Federal laws affecting the evaluation and placing of students in special education programs. Historically, teachers referred students to the counselor or school psychologist based on their personal experience with the student. Teachers were rarely involved past the initial referral stage and considered evaluation the end of their obligation in the process. The CSP was intended to use the SLC as a mechanism for shifting responsibility and accountability directly to teachers, who were familiar with the needs of the students. Because the actual implementation of the CSP was directed by the building principals, the CSP practices varied and took on different meaning at the two schools.

#### Presentation of Cases: Eastside/Westside

Teachers from two urban elementary schools participated in this study. Eastside school, a large (900 students), culturally diverse K-8 school; and Westside school a medium-sized (450 students) K-4 school with a majority African-American student body. Both schools were in the first year of implementation SLCs, an organizational structure intended to give teachers more decision-making authority. Although the School District proposed specific guidelines as to how SLCs should be organized, the actual implementation was overseen by local building principals. In the case of Westside school, the principal organized the SLCs by grades; e.g. SLC A were teachers in grades K-2, SLC B comprised grades 3 and 4. The principal maintained a leadership team which actually made most of the important decisions affecting curriculum, scheduling, and budget. The leadership team included the principal, reading teacher, and the two Small Learning Community Coordinators (SLCC) who brought teachers' concerns back to the leadership team for consideration and approval by the principal.



The SLCs at Westside met weekly as grade groups (e.g. 1<sup>st</sup> grade, or 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, etc.), and monthly after school as entire communities. Decision-making was limited to issues such as scheduling (or requests to schedule) trips, assembly programs, and occasional discussions of school-wide problems. According to the Children Achieving action plan, SLCs were to act as governing bodies to drive the instructional program of the school (School District of Philadelphia, 1995). Teachers were expected to share instructional strategies, discuss student difficulties, and plan and implement programs to address these problems. At Westside, this rarely happened. Teachers at Westside were seldom given these opportunities; the SLCCs acted as agents for the principal rather than advocates for teacher decision-making. At SLC meetings it was understood that any and all decisions were subject to approval by the principal. Teachers were encouraged to express concerns, but because the principal maintained strict control of decision-making, they rarely expressed dissatisfaction.

The SLCs at Eastside were similar in that they were organized by grades: The Achievers (K-3), and the Explorers (4-6). The SLCCs were not released from classroom duties as at Westside and although there was a leadership team, it did not take a firm command of school policies and governance. The principal at Eastside encouraged autonomy, although teachers were suspicious of the sincerity of this position. Teachers had weekly scheduled meetings during the school day as an entire SLC. The Achievers as a group were more cohesive and preferred discussing issues around literacy. The Explorers were less convinced of the validity of the SLC concept and viewed it as an imposition on their autonomy as teachers.

## CSP at Westside

The School District intended that the CSP directly involve teachers in the SLC in finding ways to address the needs of students in their community. At Westside, classroom teachers were involved only with the initial referral of the student. Teachers would submit their concerns about students to the SLCC; after that, the leadership team, supplemented by the counselor and the nurse, would discuss what interventions could be implemented for the student. Because teachers were not directly involved in the process, most of them did not know exactly how it was supposed to work. I asked the SLCCs to explain how the CSP worked at Westside:

We try to meet weekly and what we've done in the beginning we started out, with a whole group meeting every Thursday morning, by whole group I mean that I would be there, Gail is there representing her whole community, the counselor, the nurse, the principal, we have KIDS [social service agency] personnel involved in that...and then we kind of deviated from that and do a whole group meeting twice a month, and then the other two Fridays out of the month, Gail meets Fridays just about her community's concerns and then I meet separately just about my community's concerns...and I think that that was a good idea to do it that way because then I don't have to listen to information about children who are not in my community, at an overall meeting, we can just zero in on third and fourth grade and special ed. problems...(Barbara/Westside)

*Would you say that the CSP is a pretty positive process?*

Absolutely, we give the forms to the teachers and we need to talk with them, we have books for them to look at and research and go into and ask them: "What have you done? How's it working for the child? (Gail/Westside)

Teachers who had referred students were less certain that the process was working. They often would not hear back from the SLCC what was discussed about their student. Sometimes they were told to give the student extra assignments designed to address a specific problem, or asked how a student was

progressing. I was surprised to discover that some teachers, even toward the middle of the year, were not even aware that there was a process.

*How do you feel about the CSP?*

I don't even know what that is...

*The comprehensive student support process, maybe you've heard of the Tier I process, maybe you've heard it referred to that way?*

I've heard it mentioned-I don't know what it is.

*You have a student who's failing academically, or a kid who's a major behavior problem...*

Oh, I have them!

*Isn't there a form that you fill out --or you come together as a group?*

[She shakes her head, "No"]

No, we don't do any of that. Usually it seems like whatever you fill out on a kid, nothing ever gets done, so what's the point! In the beginning I was filling out forms--you couldn't believe --and nothing was done. So basically, you have to deal with it on your own. (Audrey/Westside)

Toward the end of the year, I asked Betty and Jill, the two fourth grade teachers at the school about their experiences with the CSP. When I first interviewed them earlier in the year, they had expressed some hope that, eventually, the CSP would be a useful process for them; by June they had seen the process unfold throughout the course of a year and were frustrated:

*What about the CSP how has that worked this year?*

Jill:A waste, a waste of time!

Betty: I referred two students and nothing ever happened, they were referred from last year.

Jill: I had two that were placed in special ed. But I don't know if they were started last year or not.

Betty: I did have one [student] who was placed in special ed. But he was referred already, from last year's teacher, and then I had one boy who was put in it [CSP] too, but his parents didn't want anything special done for him, so he just remained, so that was it. I've put in Tier I referral forms but I've never heard anything back about it. (Betty/Jill, Westside)

The Children Achieving agenda had advanced the CSP as a way for the SLC to share in the support of needy students. Instead, the principal at Westside had taken the teachers almost completely out of the CSP. According to Children

Achieving, the SLC teachers were supposed to share techniques and support all the students in their community. As I talked to teachers in both SLCs, I discovered that they rarely had any contact with students outside of their own classroom. As it stood, the implementation of the CSP at Westside undermined the central concept of both the CSP and the learning community. Tyack and Cuban (1995) note, schools often fit reform efforts to accommodate established practices or satisfy their own agendas.

One way to view what happened with the CSP at Westside school is to look at how the principal made the process fit the available resources. Because of budget restrictions, and because she used funds to take the SLCCs out of the classroom, the principal could not provide meeting time during the regular school day for the SLCs. The principal and the leadership team made all the decisions about what would happen to children referred by teachers. Because only the most extreme cases were referred to the team, the actual purpose of the CSP— involving teachers in instructional decision-making— was never realized.

From the perspective of structuration, the principal's use of resources did more than simply shift the responsibility for the process away from the teachers. It structured the actions of teachers and acted as both a constraining and enabling factor in the social system (Cohen, 1989; Giddens, 1979, 1984, 1995). Teachers did not meet to discuss students' needs and therefore were not aware of other students in their community, or of the needs of other teachers. This may have subverted the intention of SLCs, but it could be seen as a positive aspect for teachers who were uninterested or fearful of discussing problem students. From this perspective, the CSP at Westside did not take place in the way it was

envisioned by the School District, but it aligned with the practices of the school social system.

Instead of being reviewed by a team of teachers, students were referred to a group that did not have intimate contact with the student. Even if the intentions of the team were sincere, the actual outcome in terms of how the school implemented the process disempowered teachers. Teachers did not collaborate to help students because the leadership team took it upon themselves to make decisions about the student without consulting teachers. The leadership team may have felt that they were in the best position and had the resources to address the students' needs. Nevertheless, the consequence of their action was actually contrary to the original intent of the CSP. The CSP was supposed to bring teachers together to discuss and find supports for failing students. As it was practiced at Westside, it actually distanced teachers from the process, and consequently became another barrier to fostering a sense of community within the school.

### The CSP and Imposed Participation

The CSP at Eastside was more in keeping with the expectations of the School District. Although CSP was new in many schools, teachers at Eastside told me that a similar model for discussing students with academic problems had been used in the school for several years before the School District mandated the CSP.

The CSP process is not new, we've had the reflexive process going in our school for years, the Cabrini method, again going back to administration, 10 summers ago? Primary, middle and upper we grouped together, and were in Sugarloaf—Beaver. someplace, one of those (conference centers)--we met, in week long seminars, going through training for that, so that process has been in place the IST process came along, we had good training and our people went

away, came back--trained us. . . . so it's not a totally new kind of a thing, I think it's time again, and the paperwork, the paperwork has gotten worse. (Anne/Eastside)

In the past, teachers would meet on an ad hoc basis, and they would generally decide over a period of a couple of months whether the child should be evaluated for special education services. Once they made their recommendations, the school counselor and School District psychologist oversaw the rest of the process. The CSP changed not only the time table for getting students tested; it likely precluded special education as the outcome for addressing the needs of the student.

The process was designed to offer students extra services in the least restricted environment. This meant that teachers were expected to devise new methods of meeting the instructional needs of at-risk students. At the beginning of the year, the School District told teachers at Eastside that they should think of the CSP as a continuation of their past practices. Around December, the principal at Eastside was told that the School District felt that SLCs were not spending enough time on the CSP. The School District demanded that from now on, SLCs would spend one hundred percent of their time on the CSP. This produced a vehement reaction from Eastside teachers.

Teachers in both SLCs at Eastside were angry with the time requirement. Teachers in the Achievers SLC were particularly upset because they saw it as undermining their vision of what the SLC should accomplish:

So yeah, they've taken a good idea, and they've bastardized it and they've made it an orthodoxy and we can't—it straps us, I mean, so we're damned if we do and damned if we don't. Because if we don't—if we say we all should really just say "we're not doing it"--and not do any of these tiers and say the hell with it! But you know it's—and then it would be in their face that—they're not servicing kids, but maybe that's what they want us to do. It started out that

we would just do Tier I, now we're tier I and tier II and now they've dumped this the final part of it tier III now and now the teacher is the case manager- the School District would like to say that this CSP supports the whole child. They want a certain amount of resistance so we don't push too many kids through, so they made it difficult. So there'll be some teachers who just won't do it because of the paper work, but yet you know, you feel that you want to document the kid's problems for the next teacher, so at least it was documented. It seems to me that the CSP has just prevented kids from getting placed in special ed. Audrey is the only kid that I got placed this year, it took all year, maybe she was tested in April, it took all year! -This is a waste. Sorry, that's what it is, I think that most of the teachers would agree with me, that it's a cost saving measure, and that it's just being dumped on us, and we also resent it, and I guess that it's maybe a sign that there's some community in the SLC, you know we did originally see ourselves-as being more autonomous and this is a possible way of gaining some power-not like traditional power, but gaining some voice, rather than the teacher being the bottom of the totem pole. (Louise/Eastside)

Jody, a veteran of over twenty years in the school expressed a similar position:

I see this CSP as more of an inhibitor-that's my personal opinion. And it's really an inhibitor if they then turn around and say "this is the time that you get to work together, and this is the only thing that you can discuss" Which, I'm exaggerating a little bit, but they've really put the emphasis there, because I guess they feel that they don't want teachers to just sit and just chit-chat for an hour, they want us to be working on ways to get the kids up to level, but I'm not so sure that...they [the School District] control the conversation, they're delaying the process, but I don't know if that has anything to do with the SLCs, that the testing...but they're using the SLCs as a vehicle, and they say, "now you get your heads together and work on these kids", but now some ...apparently the intermediate level [Explorers] coordinators, the people in that group felt that because they didn't do the 100 book challenge probably, they had more free time in their meetings, so they have decided to tutor children, and they were trying to arrange to tutor these needy children that were Tier I and put up to the committee, once a week, I'm not sure, but that also has fallen down because they just can't do it, people are absent, or they get things canceled, but now has come up in our meeting and we met on Friday, not our regular meeting, but the instructional day...and some of the teachers felt very strongly that we could use our meeting time to bring a student with us and tutor them there. And I absolutely was opposed to that. . . I would really like it to be an adult time where we put our heads together and work on school problems...but two people voiced it, we did put it down in our minutes and we may



spend some time on it in the future, but I hope not every other week! But to give respect to people who felt strongly about it, we didn't say "Let's take a vote" - because I'm sure it would not have passed it was only a couple people, but that came out of frustration-with the four step Tier/step process, that was a direct result of saying "We're not getting anywhere-and no one is really coming and helping us with these children, so we just better do it ourselves!" (Jody/Eastside)

The CSP imposed procedures, time tables, and a vocabulary that structured the practices of teachers. As Jody noted, teachers in the Explorers SLC were so frustrated with trying to provide extra help to needy students that they frequently tutored students instead of conducting SLC meetings. Tutoring, coupled with absences of teachers who were supposed to cover classes during the meetings, meant that the SLC actually met less frequently than scheduled. The School District's intention for SLC s was to create a community of learners, one where teachers and students could get to know one another. This is also how they justified imposing the CSP on teachers in the communities. The School District's position was that teachers in the SLC were in the best position to determine the needs of students and provide interventions. This, they insisted, was a better system than the previous system, which used small teams of teachers who sometimes did not personally know the students.

#### The CSP as Domination

The structural dimension of domination is evidenced through the lack of resources available to teachers. The School District mandated a system that directed teachers to offer suggestions well after they had tried many interventions. Additionally, the School District did not offer any additional services to help teachers with individual student needs. Consequently, as far as the teachers were concerned, the CSP had turned into an exercise in futility.



Louise, a member of the Achievers, made comments that I heard from most of the members of the Achievers:

I think that they've taken the concept of teachers' gathering together to be supportive and give strategies to help each other with a problem child, and they've taken it and turned that around to a way—you know they've kind of made that an orthodoxy, and now, we are stuck doing that. We know we're jumping through hoops now—so nobody's really helping each other I mean we just write these strategies, we could just Xerox these strategies, put that under every. . . I mean we all say the same thing; it's their strategy to not get kids tested. (Louise/Eastside)

Seen from this perspective, the process can be viewed as having a perverse consequence for the school. The teachers' reaction to the process is a manifestation of the dialectic of control. Some teachers may not even consciously be aware that they are reacting in a negative way. They simply accepted that the system had put the process in place and that there was little they could do but to go through the motions. Many teachers grew increasingly frustrated; at one meeting I attended, a teacher commented that they were recommending the same "cookie cutter" remedies for each student that was presented. This brings into question the actual legitimacy of the process. The fact that more powerful agents in a social system, in this case administration, put processes into place does not guarantee that they will either work the way that they are supposed to or gain acceptance as a legitimate process just because it is the designated method of accomplishing the particular task.

#### The CSP and the Duality of Structure

The duality of structure views social actors' interaction through the dimensions of signification, domination, and legitimation; that is, how members experiences with the social system are mediated through communication, the use of resources, and the establishment of normative expectations and behaviors.

While it may be possible to isolate each dimension, it should be remembered that each dimension is connected to the other. In considering the CSP at Eastside, the duality of structure is useful in analyzing the effect the process had on the teachers' social system.

Signification is seen in the way language is used and defines issues and procedures. Students were no longer automatically referred to the counselor; they were now expected to go through "tiers" before they could be formally evaluated. The process demanded that teachers meet to discuss the student's problems and devise "interventions." Students were no longer the responsibility of a single classroom teacher, but rather the responsibility of a "community." The procedure was extended so that longer time lines for evaluation were imposed before the student would be recommended for special education.

The dimension of domination is seen through the ways the practices and procedures of the CSP changed teachers' expectations to effect change. The "tiers" came to represent a set of hurdles that were often frustrating and rarely productive. It also set up a dynamic within the SLCs that produced conflict among members as teachers wondered out loud why they were wasting so much time.

Finally, the dimension of legitimation established patterns of behavior that teachers came to expect of each other. Social norms in the new process included offering solutions to teachers even when they were obviously either already in place or had proven ineffective. Based on their perceptions of the situation, teachers either tried to limit the number of students they referred or took themselves out of the process altogether. By limiting the number of referrals, they could avoid being placed in a situation of having to offer extra

services to students with no extra resources. Those who decided not to participate reasoned that the amount of trouble was not worth the outcome and that they were better off trying to solve the problem themselves, without the group. This is seen, for instance, in the way that some members of the Explorers wanted to tutor students rather than attend SLC meetings.

Shotter, (1983/1997) notes that one quality of the duality of structure is that it links past actions with what will be done next. Action takes place in the active context of reciprocal relationship with previous actions. Given specific contexts, social actors know which actions will be considered "appropriate" in that context. The disturbing aspect of the CSP was the continually changing response to the actions taken by teachers. The rules and procedures of the CSP were under constant revision during the course of the year. Teachers would follow a line of action that they considered appropriate and adequate, only to be informed that they had not met additional requirements.

As familiar routines were met with unexpected responses, teachers had to decide how they could best meet the demands of the CSP given the resources available to them. Signification lies in the way that language is used to define the purpose and outcomes of the system. Teachers were told through flow charts at the limited professional development they received how to label each step of the process. Originally, they were held responsible for the first two tiers of the process. By the end of the year, the School District decided that they would do all three tiers. They were told to stop thinking of the process as a way to get students placed in special education but rather as ways that they would have to address problems. The dimension of domination is thus seen as the way in which the school (and by extension, the School District) was able to not only

define the issues, but also the conditions, language and process of how meetings were conducted. Teachers were obligated to follow set procedures in spite of their own misgivings about the legitimacy of their actions.

### Discussion

The institution of SLCs and decision-making at the local level was supposed to empower staff and establish a "community" of leaders within the school. In its actual implementation, most participants in this study felt that, rather than deciding for themselves, they were told what to do and how to do it. Consequently, the four groups developed different conceptions of what "community" and decision-making meant in the context of their schools. Far from uniform, the reform agenda produced varying and often contradictory results in both schools.

For example, at Westside, teachers were formed into grade-groups that acted independently of the SLC. Teacher leaders acted as liaisons between teachers and the principal in implementing the principal's agenda. Teachers accepted the authority of the teacher leaders and established individual relationships with them. They did not develop a "community" or group identification; instead, they continued to identify as individuals. The new organizational structure did not change the instructional practices or redistribute authority in the school. Consequently, teachers had little influence in actual decision-making. The school's response to shared decision-making was shaped by the teachers' practices which served to reinforce existing structures of power. At Eastside, teachers found that their willingness to take responsibility often had unintended and contradictory consequences. Teachers in the groups felt that although they had a strong inner sense of purpose, they were required to follow

a predetermined set of procedures for addressing the needs of at risk students. They felt that they often were simply following procedures required by the school district rather than making decisions. The reform implementation used the procedures of decision-making as a substitute for process.

Consequently, teachers saw participation in the group and CSP procedures as a reification of existing power structures. The praxis of participants— that is, how social actors perceive and use communication—resources, and normative rules actually structured the reform agenda. Because teachers followed procedures they may have satisfied the objectives of the School District but did not really have any power in their decision-making.

#### Structuration and Validity

Validity must be considered as an issue that goes beyond reporting on the relative success or failure of the proposed program. I propose that researchers look at how the praxis of participants reflects the structuration of the social system. In other words, in order to evaluate a change program, it is not enough to measure success through adherence to procedures, techniques, or even participant satisfaction. It is possible to observe behaviors that outwardly appear to reflect change but lack validity because they are not genuine. If teachers perform duties simply for the sake of satisfying demands placed on them from outside powers, are their actions still valid? If they suggest the same course of action for different students in order to simply fulfill the requirements of paperwork are their actions still valid? If the controlling power (the school or School District) is willing to accept that as long as procedures and paperwork requirements are being followed is their program still valid?

The School District argued that the CSP actually gave teachers more input and decision-making power in addressing students' needs. Yet, in the opinions of the teachers who participated in this study, the process was anything but empowering. Westside teachers felt left out of the process and saw little change in the level of actual decision-making power they had in the school. Teachers rarely even knew what the leadership team had decided and had little motivation for referring students for a process that ultimately did not involve them.

The Eastside teachers felt that the process crippled them. They were expected to address the individual needs of students in classes of at least thirty children, without any additional services. Teachers wanted to find ways of helping needy students, which meant bringing these students to the CSP. At the same time, if they participated in the process, they knew that they were only going through the motions of providing assistance to their colleagues and students because there were insufficient resources to effect any real change. The practices of the CSP were discouraging to teachers, and it changed the whole structure and social reality of the teachers' environment. Because teachers did not believe that the process would make them more effective, they were unable to make a commitment to a system of practices that they were asked to participate in (Weick, 1995).

Outwardly, the CSP at Eastside was being followed and teachers could report success in finding ways to intervene with students. In reality, because the structuration of the social system did not interpret (give signification) or validate (legitimation) the way reformers intended, the changes may not be considered successful. Genuine change occurs when the praxis of participants change.

Members must be able to see practices as compatible and respectful of their social system in order for implementation to be truly successful. Otherwise, we ignore the underlying principle of agency (empowerment); that the actions of agents can actually make a difference in the outcomes of interaction in the environment. Externally imposed practices and procedures have little chance of achieving this level of integration. Empowerment in modern society is tempered by “expert” systems that value external evaluations over the local knowledge of participants (Giddens, 1991). Reform efforts such as Children Achieving tried to institute “best practices” and the use of “expert” teachers as instructional leaders to teachers in the schools. The use of externally developed criterion and for evaluation raises that issue of objective measures versus the democratic ideal of self-governance and democratic decision-making.

The researcher is then faced with the dilemma of trying to balance the concepts of expert systems versus local knowledge and with it the nature of empowerment as a function of a self-governing social system. Along with these contrasting dimensions of governance one must consider the dynamics of democratic action as defined by the notions of the “common good” versus vested interests of social actors. These two contrasting and interconnected dimensions of decision-making highlight the need for clarification of the actual goals of group decision-making. In other words, who actually defines the process and the practice of decision-making groups? If decision-making formats are imposed on groups are they likely to follow procedures at the expense of making valid decisions? If decisions lack validity, what then, is their value?

## Structuration and Evaluation

Researchers often cite the need for participation and input from local actors in program implementation (Heck, Brandon, & Wang, 2001). Others warn of the pitfalls of expecting reforms to work from the “outside in” rather than “inside out” (Farmer & Farmer, 2000). From the perspective of evaluation and validity it is not enough to accept these caveats or to use them as a means of explaining the failure of program implementation. The value of structuration theory as a research perspective lies in its ability to identify the internal structures of social systems—the underlying factors of social action—allowing researchers to determine how local actors understand the reform efforts. It may be used to help in formative assessments, as a tool to make adjustments during implementation; or, as a summative form of evaluation to help determine the effectiveness of implementation.

Other evaluations of Philadelphia’s Children Achieving initiative relied on surveys and questionnaires with predetermined operational concepts. The problems with these evaluations do not have the ability to understand how structure is produced by praxis. They discounted or simply did not understand how groups and organizational systems work within the context of local social system. Consequently, these reports may contain facts, figures, and other important information, but they are of questionable value and validity. While they may provide information, they may merely provide descriptions of what happens without offering real explanations.

Rather than blame the failure of reform efforts on “teacher resistance” or “subversion,” policy-makers and change agents might profit from an in-depth



understanding of how social systems construct meaning and purpose. It is my contention that community, commitment, and conformity are often confused or misunderstood by social actors. The concept of “culture” has been used to explain the dynamics of social interaction in school settings without an understanding of how social systems work. Explaining what is happening in the social system, and how culture evolves, is often summed up by statements which are descriptions of beliefs, procedures, or personal relationships. It is my belief that structuration theory offers a insightful perspective of agency and transformative capacity that allows local actors to make sense of the interaction of communication, resources, role expectations, and normative rules of the social system.

The essential element missing from most reform programs is opportunities for actors to achieve what Giddens calls “transformation.” Beyond the recognition of agency, we need to examine the extent to which the practices and perceptions of social actors actually change as a result of a reform program. Transformation is a much more comprehensive and far -reaching evolution of a social system, requiring an acknowledgement by outside institutions of the value and validity of local knowledge. It requires an understanding of what Giddens calls time–space distanciation: how groups and organizations change over time and are built on the previous actions of members. Finally, it requires that participants have trust; trust in each other and in their ability to have significant influence on the workings of the social system. If we design programs of change with these factors in mind, we can expect a more successful implementation resulting in meaningful and lasting change.

## Structurational Elements of Change

The challenge of research using structuration theory lies in uncovering the dimensions of the duality of structure. In Giddens' theory, signification refers to how members bring meaning to action; domination refers to how they use rules and resources and; legitimation refers to how procedures become established as normative behaviors of the social system. The key to understanding the duality of structure lies in the realization that the dimensions cannot be separated from social action.

Perhaps another way to think of these dimensions is through their practical, everyday manifestations. I suggest here that we think of them as *Purpose, Praxis, and Integrity*. Members act according to the degree that they understand and agree with the purpose of the organization. This influences the degree of participation and commitment that they are willing to invest. Seen in this way, it is obvious that the more that members agree with the purpose of the organization, the greater the commitment they are willing to give to it.

Through their participation members establish the practices and conditions under which they act within the system. This becomes the praxis of the system; that is, the way things are done and the basis for reflection and monitoring of the behavior of other members. The day-to-day practices and interaction, allow members to become familiar with what is expected from a member of the community. As members monitor their own actions and the actions of other members, they establish rules that govern future actions. Intended and unintended consequences of actions are absorbed into these

patterns; the social system is therefore continually produced and reproduced through members' actions.

Structuration theory conceptualizes social interaction as the action of knowledgeable, interdependent, and self-regulating agents. Social actors are interdependent and reach their transformative capacity based on their ability to understand the legitimacy of other members' positions and roles in the social system. In other words, unless social actors are able to find validity for their role in the social system, there is little reason for them to participate. This is critical because it is only through the interaction of social members that beliefs and procedures are given meaning (signification), attain a consistent level of practice (domination), and ultimately are accepted as worthwhile rules and procedures (legitimation). If members see rules and procedures as something imposed on them from an external source, they are less likely to view these as legitimate and worthwhile practices. More importantly, praxis based on compliance (i.e. practices that are not established through the internal workings of social actors) may actually have perverse consequences resulting in long-term change or value.

I maintain that organizations must have internal integrity in order to survive and progress. I use the term integrity in the broadest sense of the word, i.e. the ability of the combination of elements to maintain the elements and support the structure of the organization. Structuration maintains that all dimensions of the society must work in such a way as to support the purpose and praxis of the society. If the members do not believe in the purpose or accept the practices of the organization, there is little hope that they will work to improve and sustain its existence.

The critical element in the discussion of validity and integrity of any social system must lie in the interaction of the dimensions of the duality of structure in the social system. Each dimension supports the other; and unless they are coherent and consistent, it is impossible for the society to meet its stated goals and objectives. Since the dimensions are essentially creations of the local actors, it is not possible to externally impose or mandate meaning, praxis or value.

Reform and change are not a matter of having members "buy into" the purpose of systemic change efforts such as Children Achieving. Members must see themselves as more than cogs in a wheels or puppets of change. Nor can participation be the sole indicator of successful change efforts. In terms of participation, Children Achieving had a very high rate of involved individuals (Foley, 2001). The fatal flaw of Children Achieving and other reform efforts like it lies in their inability to recognize, or unwillingness to trust, the internal beliefs and practices of members within the social system.

#### Empowerment or Transformation

In the final analysis, when we ask whether the participants in this study were "empowered," we are faced with the equivocal nature of the term itself. What makes one actor feel "empowered" can be perceived as an imposition by another. For example, while some members of the Achievers were happy to discuss student problems, they saw the forum and format for their meetings as contrived and ultimately wasteful. From the viewpoint of other members, they were satisfied that they were able to express their point of view, which was an improvement over past practices. Through their participation in the day-to-day activities of the school, members created a structure reflecting their understanding of what the school required of them. In other words, instead of

the uniform structure and procedures envisioned by the Children Achieving reform program, the actual manner in which the reform was implemented varied a great deal depending upon the context of the individual school. Consequently the meanings, effectiveness, and outcomes of reform were variable and often contradictory. While other researchers (Foley, 2001) have noted the manifestations and contradictions of the Children Achieving reform, the current study offers a method of analysis of the roots for such contradictory outcomes.

The very premise underlying research in reform is somewhat suspect. Perhaps we should rethink how we conceptualize organizational motivation as the need to "empower" social actors. Giddens (1984) reminds us that agency is already possessed by social actors in that their actions structure the social system. In this sense, empowerment is not a goal in itself; members do not "become" empowered, but they do need to feel that their actions make a difference. Often, they may act according to directions given to them with less than satisfactory results; in other words, they do not realize a level of transformation, the ability to make a difference in their social environment. What, then, is the essential difference that makes certain actions more worthwhile and effective than others?

Structuration, as seen through the duality of structure, helps us to understand that social actors' praxis determines the level of transformation that they achieve within the society. Teachers in the two schools in the study had vastly different ways of communicating with each other and their administration. For example, at Eastside, the Achievers had a democratic and egalitarian way of running meetings and reaching decisions. They were committed to using their focus on literacy and sharing ideas as the basis for decision-making within the group. Because this fostered a sense of community

(i.e. shared values, beliefs), the members of the Achievers were able to influence the conditions of their workplace much more significantly than were the Explorers. The Explorers were somewhat suspicious of the reform movement and of each other. Decisions were not looked upon as a group effort, but rather the action of one more powerful group over the other. This dynamic in itself was enough to create a completely different structure which brought an entirely different meaning to the reform effort.

The concept of democratic action is premised upon the ability of each individual to make a difference. If this were not true, then the whole concept of democracy would be invalid. If transformative capacity is the ability to make a difference, as Giddens insists, then we must assume that democracy is a transformative concept and process. In the context of the present study, I suggest that processes that do not promote democracy cannot be truly transformative. Extending this conceptualization, I'm suggesting unless a process is transformative, it will not have long lasting, worthwhile effects on the social system.

#### Change or Development

If the intention of the reform is empowerment of social actors, we must consider the extent to which they have been able to contribute to the actual process of reform. This may require that we redefine the conceptual framework of how change programs are implemented and evaluated. The first step is to understand the nature of structuration: that social systems are the products of interaction by knowledgeable actors rather than external policy makers. Change occurs in any case; the difference lies in redefining the locus of structure.

Perhaps we should reconsider the entire notion of change and redefine it as development, which is more in keeping with how structuration regards social progress. Change implies a shift—sometimes a significant shift—of method, purpose, and action. Structuration envisions society as in a continual process of development unmediated by outside forces. This is what is meant by praxis. Society is not shaped by the grand design of “experts” but through the process of interaction by social actors over a period of time. The significance of structuration cannot be reduced to simple issues such as results that are deemed positive or negative; success or failure. It must be kept in mind that outcomes can be intended or unintended; in either case, they are what the social system is built upon. Therefore, it is not only unrealistic, but essentially impossible for any “systemic” reform to be truly systemic. Such an attitude imagines social systems within a larger system to be monolithic duplications of ideal circumstances that have never, in fact actually existed. At best, therefore, they are idealistic and utopian, and at worst, misguided and quixotic.

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