FOUR FACES OF EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS*

PER-ERIK ELLSTRÖM
Department of Education, University of Linköping, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to explore the presumed distinctive character of educational organizations. This is done by explicating and proposing an integration of four organizational models. The models are called: the rational-, the political-, the social system-, and the anarchistic model, respectively. A basic assumption is that the models represent four complementary dimensions of organizations, rather than four mutually exclusive alternatives. A typology is outlined, indicating a set of conditions under which the four dimensions are assumed to be differently salient. In conclusion, it is argued that educational organizations may be conceived of as involving an interplay of four dimensions characterized by the keywords: truth (the rational dimension), trust (the social dimension), power (the political dimension), and foolishness (the anarchistic dimension).

Although it is widely recognized that schools, at least in certain respects, exhibit unique organizational properties (Katz, 1964; Bidwell, 1965; Weick, 1976), there is no, or only a limited, consensus concerning the character of this uniqueness.

While the school according to certain authors is described as an orderly and rational bureaucracy, characterized by a hierarchical and coordinated structure (Bidwell, 1965; Shipman, 1968; Banks, 1976; Berg, 1981), others have focused their descriptions on the ambiguity (March and Olsen, 1976) and the foolishness (March, 1976) that are assumed to characterize the loosely coupled (Weick, 1976; Katz, 1964; Bidwell, 1965), and anarchic (Cohen et al., 1972) world of the school.

In addition, however, there is also a split between those portraying the

* The research reported in this article was supported by grants from the Swedish National Board of Education (project No. 4022) and from the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences (No. F 409/80).
school as a socio-cultural system held together by a network of informal interpersonal relations, shared goals, and a common organizational culture (Sarason, 1971; Alderfer and Brown, 1975; Ekholm, 1976), and those viewing the school as a political entity, characterized by conflicts, power struggles, and bargaining among interest groups and subunits as normal ingredients of organizational life (Baldridge, 1971; Isling, 1980; Sandkull, 1981). That is, there is a split between a consensus and a conflict view of educational organizations.

In what way then, if any, do schools have a distinctive organizational character? The purpose of this article is to explore this question. This is done, firstly, by explicating four organizational models corresponding to the four views of the school as an organization that were distinguished above. However, because each model emphasizes a different aspect of organizations, they may give, at best, only a partial understanding of the organizational character of the school. Therefore, an attempt is made to integrate the four organizational models into a more comprehensive framework. This is done, by conceptualizing the models as four different, although complementary dimensions of organizational reality. More specifically, a typology is proposed indicating a set of conditions under which the four organizational dimensions are assumed to be differently salient.

Four Organizational Models

The notion of an organizational model refers to a set of assumptions, or a research orientation, concerning organizational reality. In other words, an organizational model has the character of a conceptual scheme, which can be used for descriptive and analytical purposes.

In the text below, four organizational models are described. The four models are called: the rational-, the political, the social system-, and the anarchistic model, respectively. For each of the models, the description will focus on the assumptions made concerning organizational processes. Matters concerning organizational structure and design are touched upon only in so far as they have clear implications for processual aspects of organizations.

The Rational Model

The rational model of organizations is conceptually tied to the assumption that organizations can be characterized in terms of a set of goals or preferences. Organizations are viewed as purposefully designed instruments (means) for the pursuit of the goals or the intentions of some dominant actor or coalition of actors (Gouldner, 1959; Allison, 1971; Georgiou, 1973; Abrahamsson, 1975). In accordance with this instrumental view, organizational action is assumed to be