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ABSTRACT

Educational researchers examining school boards and school governance have committed some conceptual errors in the past. For example, to judge school boards according to traditional political concepts of responsiveness and representativeness is to ignore the insular nature of most boards of education, as well as to fail to take into account the at least partially successful attempts of the reformers to remove the schools from the influence of "politics." Systems theory has been applied to educational management with little substantive results, since systems theory offers no propositions that can be empirically tested. Although educational governance did not in the past receive the kind of attention it deserved from researchers, this area is a fruitful area of investigation, especially as the demands of technology increasingly strain the traditional notions of democratic governance in education. The author proposes directions for future research, concluding that the relation between decision-making styles and policy output in education is a legitimate, necessary area of investigation. (DS)

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SCHOOL BOARD RESEARCH:
THE PROBLEMS AND THE PROSPECTS

Harmon Zeigler

To a political scientist, the study of school boards reveals both challenging and intellectually exalting opportunities and almost pathetic naiveté. I plead guilty to both charges. Since I had never read, nor written, anything about school boards until 1968, perhaps both my excitement and naiveté are understandable.

The Centrality of Representative Concepts

Since I knew very little about school boards when I began my research, I brought to the enterprise the traditional biases of political science. Namely, I assumed that since (in most cases) school board members are elected public officials, they should be "responsive." Certainly, the notion of responsiveness is central to political science. As Eulau and Prewitt, in their exhaustive study of city councils, put it; "For in a democracy, the degree to which the governors are responsive to the preferences of the governed is the sine qua non of whether democracy in fact exists." (Eulau and Prewitt, 1973, p. 24). In a somewhat more dramatic mode, Dahl refers to control of leaders (or response by leaders) as the "First Problems of Politics" (Dahl and Lindblom, 1953, p. 273). The relation of rulers to ruled is what political science is all about; theories of representation, control, distribution of influence (e.g., pluralism vs. elitism) are based implicitly or explicitly upon the dynamics of the interaction between

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the few who rule and the many who do not. (Pitkin, 1967). Consequently, empirical studies of legislative decision-making began virtually simultaneously with the "behavioral" revolution in political science (circa 1957). The U.S. Congress, as an example, has been subjected to case studies, surveys, roll call analyses, etc., under the auspices of the American Political Science Association, and an exhaustive literature has been developed. (Huitt and Peabody, 1969). Most state legislatures have, at one time or another, been given similar treatment. The Legislative System, the first comparative study of state legislatures, was begun in 1957. (Wahlke, Eulau, Buchanan and Ferguson, 1962). Upon completion of his studies in state legislatures, one of the principal investigators, Heinz Eulau, turned his attention to city councils.

There has been no such comparative obsession among students of educational administrations: "By 1910, a conventional educational wisdom had evolved among the school men and leading business and professional men who spearheaded the reforms. The watchwords of reform became centralization, expertise, professionalization, nonpolitical control, and efficiency. The governance structure needed to be revised so that school boards would be small, elected at large, and purged of all connections with political parties and general government officials, such as mayors and councilmen." (Wirt and Kirst, 1972, p. 7). Thus, until recently, "educationists" did not care about politics, and political scientists did not care about education.

While it is now popular to chide political scientists for neglecting 15,000 units of government, and to scorn students of educational

administration for failing to understand "political reality", there is, in fact, sound reason to argue that, school boards really are different; that is, the "standard" model of a responsive decision-making body may be inappropriate.

A distinction--one which political scientists too often fail to recognize--should be made between organizations whose decisions are supposed to benefit the public at large, and organizations which provide a service to a specialized public. (Blau and Scott, 1962, p. 45). The U.S. Congress, 50 state legislatures, and 18,000 municipal governments certainly are expected to be responsive to "the public" because the public is the beneficiary of their decisions. When the public does not benefit, so the argument runs, one can always throw the rascals out. I am, of course, deliberately simplifying a far more complex process merely to make the point that public decisions are assumed to be subject to public control.

Schools, however, do not serve the general public; they provide a service to a specialized population. Just as a hospital, staffed by professionals, is supposed to cure an ill person, so a school, staffed by professionals, is supposed to turn an illiterate person into an efficient member of society. Again, I am oversimplifying for the sake of comparison, but the point should not be lost because of the simplicity: If schools really are service organizations, providing professional expertise to a specialized population, then we can assume that the specialized population does not know what will best serve its interest and must rely on professional judgment. Under such

circumstances, to be responsive (that is, to behave like the ideal city council) would make educational decision-makers "unprofessional".

As an example, Oregon, as has become its habit, recently made the national news with its "competency based education". The public schools of Oregon have undertaken the responsibility of defining for the student, explicitly, the competencies necessary for "twelve basic survival areas". In other words, the school is telling its clients what they must do in order to, I assume, literally survive. Suddenly, the list of competencies (there are 203) materialized. Thus, experts told children (1) what they must know, and (2) where they can learn it. A few of the competencies, which all must achieve, illustrate the confidence of the experts (and the dismay of the students):

- #80 The student recognizes family problems which may cause instability.
- #81 The student practices good dental health.
- #96 The student develops cardiovascular efficiency.
- #100 The student develops explosive strength.
- #108 The student identifies personal value conflicts.
- #114 The student participates in making political decisions.
- #120 The student demonstrates the ability to contact governmental agencies for assistance in basic problems or concerns.
- #121 The student defines American Democratic Government as bodies of persons selected by the people to resolve conflicts and provide services and protection for society.
- #126 The student understands that the political resources the individual has can affect public policy.

#127 The student explains the necessity for long-range planning in the use of land, water, and air space, and all other natural resources.

#201 The student identifies basic factors in Keeping a Job.

As far as the school board (in Eugene) is concerned, the experts are free to demand that children brush their teeth, develop "explosive strength," participate in politics, accept an artificial definition of democracy, agree to an unrealistic assessment of individual impact upon public policy, and so on.

Oregon's competency based education program presumes that it can identify and measure desired outcomes of the educational process. Aside from arrogance and absurdity, Oregon's new system illustrates quite well why schools (and school boards) are poorly viewed through the normal representational roles assigned to elected public officials. No other legislative body would presume to dictate to its clientele a comparable set of guidelines. The furor created by mandatory seatbelts is a case in point. More often than not, school board members and superintendents reject the notion that they should respond to demands from clients; they accept the notion that they should follow their own judgment. (Zeigler and Jennings, 1974, p. 120). As recently expressed by the Director of Educational Policies Service, National School Boards Association, "...Many people seem to believe that since board members are supposed to be the representative of the local voters they should respond automatically to the loudest voices in the local community. Sometimes, those voices are misinformed--and wrong. And the school board is wrong when it makes decisions on the basis of

its popularity of the moment with local pressure groups rather than on the basis of its obligation to uphold the state's interest in education and--one might add--its prior obligation to uphold the principles imbedded in the United States Constitution." (Dickinson, 1973, p. 100). Such a view--now widely described as a "trustee orientation" is, admittedly, held by public officials other than school board members. However, at the risk of generalizing from somewhat shaky data, I suggest that school board members are more likely than other elected officials (city council members, state legislators, etc.), (Zeigler and Jennings, 1974, p. 249), to reject the notion of responding to demands and to accept the fundamental tenets of a service organization: one must do what is best for the client, whether or not he understands what his actual interests are.

So I would phrase one problem of past school board research (including my own) in this way: Is the school board an appropriate unit of analysis for students of educational decision-making if, in fact, it habitually defers to experts? My own answer is yes, since it can be demonstrated that school boards, under certain specified (and relatively rare) conditions, do in fact respond to demands.

At the moment, the answer is positive because, in spite of Oregon's confidence, there is no technology of education: "After a century of psychological research, educators still know little about how children learn." (Griffiths, 1973, pp. 5-6). Their conclusions were recently outlined by Jenks and others who argue that, in effect, "Nothing matters". (Jenks, 1972).

This raises an additional question, one to which some tentative answers have been slowly forthcoming. If there is no technology of education, why does the representative role of board members contribute to a habitual deference to expertise? Why, of all the units of local government, does the school board tend to "reverse" the "normal" representative role? That is, why do school boards represent the views of the superintendent to the public, rather than representing the views of the public to the superintendent?

The Autonomy of Educational Policy-Making

The answer which satisfies most researchers is the notion of the autonomy of the educational decision-making process from other spheres of political activity. The autonomy of school policy-making is such a major theme that extensive documentation is unnecessary. (Peterson, 1974, pp. 348 & 389; Zeigler, Jennings & Peak, 1974, pp. 177-226). It is generally agreed that, because of the rush toward reform at the beginning of the twentieth century, school politics became "apolitical" in the sense of being detached from the partisan political process. (Cronin, 1973). Such a process of detachment is especially noteworthy in large cities, where the complexities of social and political life propel most policy-makers into, at the least, an intensity of group interaction. Yet numerous observers of New York City, for example, have emphasized the insularity of its educational system. (Gittell, 1965). Even though group politics pervades New York City's political life, most agree that educational decisions have been contained within the administrative staff. (Sayre and Kaufman, 1960).

In smaller district, of course, the level of conflict tends to be lower, hence school boards are even more tuned out. (Vidich and Bensman, 1958, p. 174).

The most conspicuous example of the use of insulation as an explanation comes from a careful case study of school board turnover (derived from the Claremont research). However, the study points to some flaws in the insulation hypothesis which deserve more careful comparative analysis. Typically, board members, elected in non-partisan, at-large elections, operate in a consensual style and select a superintendent whose approach is consistent with the ideology of the board. Increasingly, with the superintendent playing a more dominant role, the educational decision-making process becomes less responsive. An enclosed group carefully replaces retiring members with reliable new ones.

In times when the community is undergoing substantial political changes, however, a process begins which runs from incumbent defeat to eventual involuntary retirement of the superintendent. The new superintendent, in turn, begins the process again. (Iannaccone and Lutz, 1970).

At different points in time, therefore, the same decision-making unit might appear responsive or unresponsive. Unfortunately, this particular hypothesis has never been subjected to comparative analysis, and the only available systematic comparative analysis is not longitudinal. (Zeigler and Jennings, 1974).

Nevertheless, it seems likely that the process of incumbent defeat, and superintendent replacement are both relatively rare and,

even if they are becoming more common, suggest a form of responsiveness which is, at best, a poor substitute for governance (e.g., negotiation with various groups). I would describe a governing process which, in order to respond to community preferences, finds it necessary to dismantle and reorganize virtually totally a poor substitute for a governing process in which conflict is accepted as a normal aspect of political life. The point is that even "responsive" boards seem to have to be clubbed over the head.

A facile explanation for the "different" nature of the responsive modes of school boards is that they are legally and politically separate bodies. At-large non-partisan elections certainly contribute to insulation. But most local officials are elected in exactly the same way. Yet I have suggested that the professionally dominated, insulated decision-making body is more likely to be found in education. Note well, I am not suggesting a difference of kind, only degree. The relation between board and superintendent is not atypical of the relations between lay boards and professionals in general. (Zald, 1969, pp. 97-111). City councils, for instance, are recruited in much the same fashion as school boards, have the same class bias, the same sort of issueless competition, and the same limited contact with relevant groups. (Eulau and Prewitt, 1974). The norm of "volunteerism" is pervasive, especially in reformed municipal governments. That is, city councilmen serve out of a sense of citizen duty, and are offended by demands for responsiveness. (Prewitt, 1970, p. 11). Still, they are probably not as unresponsive as school boards and, again speculatively, they tend to play a larger leadership role.

(Eyestone, 1971).

Explanations for the unique position of school boards abound, but most are far from convincing in that they apply equally well to other, less insulated local decision-making bodies. The explanation I find most convincing is the schizophrenic nature of school governance alluded to earlier. Part commonweal, part service, school boards behave like typical schizophrenics. On the one hand, they willingly (indeed, eagerly) give power away to the experts (who, according to their own admission, cannot prescribe cures). On the other hand, they espouse an ideology of lay control.

The Inevitability of Technology

If such a schizophrenic condition describes the board member of today, think of the future. There probably will be some sort of reliable technology of teaching and learning developed within this century. Assuming that education ultimately will become a part of technological society, what then for responsiveness? The next few years will be, if we are to survive, years of great deference paid to technology. (Ferkess, 1974). The major conditioning factors of human individual and social life will be the characteristics, distribution and use of machines and techniques developed on the basis of scientific knowledge. Survival will depend on technology, or alternatively, we will confront social chaos, widespread poverty, (even more so than now), and political instability. Even to maintain what we regard as a normal lifestyle today, complex technologies will have to be developed (e.g., clean water, clean air, etc.). Put simply, human life

will have to be regulated by more powerful technologies of surveillance and control than now exist. (Heilbroner, 1974, pp. 99-126). Unlimited information about every human being and every human act will be readily available. Regimentation is unavoidably in the future of education.

Compounded with the necessity of technology is the danger of increasing social unrest unless technological solutions are quickly forthcoming. As the quality of life diminishes, anxiety moves ^{people} in the direction of authority, not responsiveness. Survival may be possible only under governments (including educational governments) capable of organizing technology far more efficiently than is possible in a democratic setting. If school board members are ^{unresponsive} today, how will (or should) they respond to a true educational technology? Responsiveness may be a luxury which, even in its limited form, we can no longer afford.

Such speculations aside, growth in technological expertise may be accompanied by increased (and mutually incompatible), demands for responsiveness and accountability. I tend to think that this will not be the case, since the demands for increased responsiveness occurred at the peak of the 1960's protest era; since that time (with a few notable exceptions), schools have returned to the ^{public} low/priority they once held. But even if demands for responsiveness do not increase, what kind of school board could possibly regulate a professional bureaucracy armed with a reliable technology of education? Today's board, meeting twice a month, relying on the superintendent for information, could hardly be equal to the task.

Some Past Conceptual Errors

It is unfortunate then that the concepts used for the analysis of school board behavior (as well as the methodology), were borrowed uncritically from other social sciences. I have used responsiveness and representative roles for illustrative purposes, partially because they are so central to political science, partially because I am familiar with them, and partially because, as I have suggested, they may be inappropriate.

Let us turn, then, to the more general problem of the extent to which borrowing concepts and methodologies from other disciplines can lead to serious difficulties.

In 1967, one of those in attendance at this meeting criticized his colleagues for, in effect, contributing to the myth of apolitical politics in education by avoiding the crucial questions of influence and authority in exchange for the questions preferred by administrators (e.g., "efficiency"). (Iannaccone, 1967).

Although one never knows how intellectual trends get started, somebody apparently was listening. While students of educational administration, following this lead, began to develop some sense of internal independence from school administrators, political scientists began to examine school politics (largely because there was money to be had). In the late 1950's a few political scientists were urging studies of educational politics, but were largely ignored. (Eliot, 1959, pp. 1037-1051). I refer explicitly to David Easton's 1957 essay which, although written largely to justify his own interest in

political socialization, argued that the educational system be understood as a subsystem of the general political system. (Easton, 1957, pp. 304-16). Published in a relatively obscure journal, it had little impact upon political scientists (who preferred to follow Easton's empirical lead into socialization), but seemed to impact heavily, if belatedly, upon educational administration specialists.

As researchers, determined to, somehow, study education and politics groped for a theory, Easton seemed most accessible. It was not so much Easton, it was systems as a concept, which captured the imaginations of researchers. Although fairly complex theoretically, bits and pieces of Easton's work were abstracted, uncritically, from the whole (lest I appear unusually critical, political scientists were committing the same error--uncritical borrowing--as they studied "their" institutions). The part of Easton's work which captured most imaginations was his notion of the input-conversion--output process, whereby demands are converted by decision-makers into "the authoritative allocation of values." In all honesty, however, I cannot find any empirical work which did not simply tack systems theory onto some rather obvious commonsense notions. Consequently, the net result of this first effort at conceptual borrowing was simple categorization, e.g., a communication was identified as a "demand", a decision was identified as "output" and so on. Absent was an effort at systematic explanation between kinds of variables, for example, the nature and intensity of demands and content of decisions. It was not that Easton was wrong, it was that he was too right (too inclusive). A

recent survey of the literature, for instance, adopts systems theory as an integrating device, and then proceeds to discuss (quite adequately), virtually everything ever written on the topic of education and politics (at every level of governance). (Wirt and Kirst, 1972).

As political scientists gradually came to understand, one can use, or discard, systems theory without gaining or losing much. An obscure piece by Gerald Stroufe made the point quite well: educational administration used systems theory as window dressing, rather than as a genuine conceptual scheme, largely because systems theory offers no propositions to be tested. (Stroufe, paper presented in 1969).

The Power Structure Fiasco

Lest I be misunderstood into being interpreted as arguing that nothing was gained, let it be clear that, at least Easton could be interpreted as guiding research toward the existence (or lack thereof); of community-school linkages. Efforts to describe co-variance between the educational subsystem and the larger political system were subsequently undertaken. This line of research, however, borrowed from sociology, rather than political science. Hunter and his notion of community power served the same role as Easton and his notion of the political system. (Hunter, 1953).

The fault this time was not so much in the inclusiveness of the theory, but again in the uncritical borrowing of a concept. Unfortunately, the damage this time was more serious. Briefly, since the dominant mode of sociological thought obviated the existence of a power

elite, such an elite must "run" schools. Investigators were virtually desperate to demonstrate the community power structures and educational decision-making styles were interrelated. The method of the research was generally the case study of a single community, with the absence of comparative analysis opening up the temptation to conclude that educational decisions were simply extensions of political decisions. Moreover, just as no one successfully demonstrated the utility of systems theory, no one successfully established the link between community decision-making style and educational decision-making structure (although not for lack of effort; in one case, field teams of graduate students, fully briefed on the propositions that the distribution of influence in the community was reflected in the internal structure of school board influence, judged both the power structure of the community and the decisional style of the board in group discussions after two days of field work).

Some Research Priorities and Methodological Appeals

If the uncritical borrowing of concepts has led to problems, so has the uncritical borrowing of methodologies. However, (other than the one instance mentioned above), the fault lies not so much in inadequate statistical manipulation, as in an inadequate data base. Case studies, many of which were quite well done, were for years the accepted mode of research. By case study, I mean to use the phrase in its most restricted sense, e.g., the description of an event. Some of the better--and more theoretically provocative--were longitudinal in that they traced the rise and fall of issues over an extended

period of time. Nevertheless, comparative, systematically gathered data bases for school boards lagged well behind such data bases for other legislative bodies. Still to be gathered is comparative panel data (e.g., data from a variety of places of different points in time).

My task is not to talk about the future, but the past. However, I also have been given the chance to talk about "opportunities". In order to do so, let me offer a few generalizations about how we might improve our performance:

- (1) The school board, as an object of research, should not be considered singly, but as it interacts with other units in the decision-making system, (especially professional staff).
- (2) The case study should be abandoned.
- (3) Studies should be both longitudinal and comparative.
- (4) The individual school board member should be replaced by the school board (as a collective body), as the unit of analysis.
- (5) The school boards should be studied simultaneously with studies of other local decision-making bodies in the same area.
- (6) We should confront the "so what" question squarely and openly.

There is a common methodological theme, initially made by Eulau, running through these suggestions. In distinguishing between the subject of inquiry and the object of inquiry, he pointed out that the two need not exist on the same analytic level. When the object of inquiry is a collective decision-making body, there are irreducible properties of that body which cannot be analyzed merely by focusing upon the behavior of the individuals who compose it at the individual level. Although Eulau grants that it is "difficult if not impossible

to observe the behavior of the group without observing the behavior of individuals within the group." he argues for the employment of procedures which will permit inference from the subject unit (the individual) to the object unit (the collectivity). There are methodological pitfalls in these proposals, but the benefits are substantial, especially if one accepts all, or a portion of the research agenda I am suggesting:

"Although the individual in a group and the group as a whole make decisions simultaneously, in the real world of politics where institutionalized groups make decisions and take action, it is the group as a whole and not its individual members that, under given decision rules, is the effective decision-maker. The city council, not the individual city councilman, commits the city to a course of action: the Senate of the United States, not Senator Jones, ratifies treaties. It follows that we may want to say something about the behavior of the group rather than the behavior of its component parts. In that case, the behavior of the individual members may get in our way. This is particularly true if we want to compare the behavior of many groups--say all the city councils in a metropolitan area, all the committees of Congress, or all the nations of the world....How can we go about our business of making statements about group behavior without either talking about the individuals in the group or by using analogical and inferential reasoning?

The answer lies....in bringing all of a unit's properties, whether residing in the group as a whole or in its parts, on to the same level of analysis." (Eulau, 1969, pp. 6-7).

Two recent studies, one of city councils, one of school boards, have adopted (with significantly different methodological techniques) the philosophy of the collective unit. (Eulau and Prewitt, 1973; Zeigler and Jennings, 1974). I am not in a position to judge the merits of either for obvious reasons. However, returning to the six priorities research I offered, let me propose for your consideration, how the next set of research on school boards might look.

First, let us select a sample of school districts stratified along the following dimensions:

1. Legal constraints (e.g., partisan vs. non-partisan elections, district vs. at-large elections, etc.).
2. Environmental contexts (e.g., large vs. small, urban vs. rural).

Next, we should systematically observe and record the pattern of communication, and influence within these districts for at least one year. Observation would include not only the interaction between the board and the superintendent, and the board and community interest groups, but also within the bureaucracy, and between the bureaucracy and the superintendent. Simultaneously, the same process should be conducted with other local legislative bodies.

So What?

The goal of this research should address my final point: so what? We know that there are systematic variations in the behavior of board members and superintendents in, for example, "Reformed", and "unreformed" districts. What we do not know is the relationship between variance in governing or influence structure and policy output.

The example which comes most readily to mind is Lineberry and Fowler's provocative essay of the effects of municipal reform upon municipal outputs, taken further. (Lineberry and Fowler, 1967, pp. 701-716). Expenditures in "unreformed" cities are more "predictable", thus, the inference is made that the translation of social conflict into public policy is more immediate. (The device by which this assessment is made is simply the correlation of expenditures with social characteristics, controlling for government structure). As of now, even this rudimentary device has not been performed in educational research. Again, we do know that there are systematic variations in patterns of governance. We do not know if there are systematic variations in policy as a consequence of these variations.

Yet, there is a problem to which I made earlier reference: schools are different. It is relatively simple to measure the output of a municipal government or state government (indeed so simple that the number of publications using such data is virtually limitless). But what is the output of an educational system? Is it merely expenditures? If so, then (assuming Jenks, et al., are correct) (Jenks, 1972), we

can all go home since they (and countless others) conclude that economic, not political variables, predict policy output. Those that have the money spend it. But the policy outputs of education are more complex. Is the policy of schools to be measured in the achievement of its clients (which seems reasonable)? If so, is there any relation between how an educational system is governed and what its students achieve? If not, why (except for the pleasure of it) study school governance? If so, what is the relationship?

Suppose, for example, that we conduct my suggested research and discover that educational systems which are closely linked to overall political systems and are closely attentive to the demands of constituents (e.g., those that are "responsive") consistently (controlling, of course, for the 75 percent of the variance allegedly explained by non-school factors), turn out students with less adequate basic skills than those which are autonomous. What if all those reformers were right and most political scientists are wrong? Of course, student achievement may be a poor measure of output, but at least it gets at my "so what" dilemma.

To return to my more speculative mode of thinking about technology and participation, the above scenario suggests that participation may seriously hamper technology. Yet, maybe technology should be hampered. Suppose, to carry the argument to its ultimate conclusion, we find that one reason for the higher achievement rate in unresponsive schools is that they have perfected chemical learning (I am assured that within twenty five years we can simply inject a student with, say, Introduction to Algebra). Would the question of what is learned then not

become too important to be left to the technicians?

If we can agree to pursue the relation between decision-making style and policy outputs, it may be that our future research will be of interest to someone other than ourselves.

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