British Journal of Sociology of Education
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713409002

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Online Publication Date: 01 January 1980
To cite this Article: Bell, L. A. (1980) 'The School as an Organisation: a re-appraisal', British Journal of Sociology of Education, 1:2, 183 - 192
To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/0142569800010204
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0142569800010204

British Journal of Sociology of Education, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1980

The School as an Organisation: a re-appraisal

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In 1970 Brian Davies argued that, "We lack anything like an adequate sociology of the school and that one aspect of that lack is in terms of our knowledge of schools as organisations" (Davies, 1970, p. 250).

He suggests that theoretical and conceptual weaknesses pervade the organisational analysis. The literature in this field reveal a bewildering plethora of approaches to the sociology of organisations, many of which appear to have unreconciled differences between them. It also indicates that the analytical emphasis focused upon the development of inter-organisational comparisons and, as a result, the development of specific organisations and their particular nature has tended to be neglected. Yet, in spite of these difficulties Davies argues that it would be better to explore the relevance of existing organisational theory for the sociology of education rather than to deny its existence. Only by so doing might the analysis of schools as organisations be advanced.

Hoyle, making a similar point, also notes the neglect of the study on schools as organisations within British sociology of education (Hoyle, 1965). He too identifies a series of inadequacies and suggests that when organisational theory is applied to schools the result might be at best a partial analysis. For example pupils might be much more amenable than teachers and thus the emphasis of research might be more upon the selection and differentiation of pupils and on their subculture rather than on the authority structure or the decision-making processes within the school. Hoyle himself pointed out subsequently that the most significant organisational studies, such as Hargreaves (1967), King (1969), and Lacey (1970) have been more concerned with the pupil world than the staff world and therefore they tell us little about how schools operate and how decisions are made in any direct sense (Hoyle, 1973).

The development of the study of schools as organisations thus appears to have been inhibited by the selective nature of the application of organisational analysis to schools and by a failure to take account of the major conceptual difficulties which exist within much of the literature on organisational theory. This has led to the

development, albeit embryonic, of a view of schools as organisations which may be, at best, inappropriate and, at worst, misleading. Unfortunately, the espousal of the very theory to which sociologists of education in Britain appear to have been directed by both Hoyle and Davies has tended to exacerbate this situation. A brief consideration of some of the major strands in the organisational analysis of the school will illustrate this point and might enable some tentative suggestions for an alternative, or at least a complementary, perspective to be offered.

Schools as Organisations

Where the organisational aspects of the school have been considered they have had attributed to them features such as clear goals, identifiable personnel, a relevant and explicit technology and relationships based on positional rather than personal factors. These structure features are thought to produce consistency, predictability and stability. Taken together the extent to which a school's organisation is thought to exhibit these characteristics indicates something about the nature of its authority and control structures. If an organisation is found to be unpredictable or thought to be irrational in its decision-making then those who are subjected to this unpredictability or irrationality are aggrieved because such events are unexpected in the context of a formal organisation. Similarly when some sections of an organisation fail to respond to the demands of other sections in the expected way a degree of tension is created between the sections and perhaps between the members of those sections. This is as true of schools as it is of any other form of organisation. The expectations and the assumptions on which they are based may, however, rest on an unrealistic notion of the nature of school as organisations, although this tends not to be reflected in the relevant sociological literature.

The Organisational Goals of Schools

Banks (1976), begins her discussion of schools as organisations with Etzioni's definition which identifies the central feature of any organisation as being a structure designed to pursue specific goals (Etzioni, 1964). She reinforces the Parsonian position that it is the primacy of goal orientation that provides the main feature for distinguishing organisation from other social structures (Parson, 1964). Thus basic to the idea of any organisation whether it is a school, a prison or a large corporation, is the idea of a means-end relationship of the formal social arrangements to the goals of the organisations. Organisations themselves are assumed to have a relatively high level of predictability, stability and consistency. This is thought to be as true of schools as of other organisations.

This view is echoed by Musgrave (1968), and Shipman (1975). The latter, pointing out that schools are established to achieve definite ends, argues that four fundamental organisational goals can be identified for schools, although he does indicate that there may be a difference in emphasis between different types of educational institutions. The former states firmly that, "Schools can be viewed as organisations in some ways akin to factories" (Musgrave, 1968, p. 67). The goals of education, it is argued, penetrate down to the classroom and influence the work of the teacher. This suggests that such factors as the division of labour, power and communication in the school are deliberately planned to facilitate the achievement of the school's goals. Lambert, Bullock & Millham (1970), in similar vein, have developed a practical manual for the study of schools as organisations. They place

their emphasis on instrumental, expressive and maintenance goals and produce an analysis which presupposes that such goals attract a degree of consensus, can be identified and related to structures intended to achieve them.

Lambert *et al.* (1970) do recognise, however, that such an analysis of abstract goals may appear unreal and theoretical, a point which appears to have been conveniently overlooked in much of the literature. Davies (1970) suggests that the major problem in discussing organisational goals is that of identifying how goals are set and whose goals count as the goals of the organisation. This focus on goals tends to suggest that schools are highly effective goal-seeking organisations. Yet schools certainly can be regarded as operating adequately when official goals are not reflected in the real state of the school. Frequently, attempts to identify the organisational goals of schools produce an analysis which is at such a high level of abstraction as to defy specification (e.g. Shipman, 1975). This, in turn, may be the result of wide variations of goals between schools, the differences between schools themselves, and the difficulty in obtaining any real consensus of what the goals of schools are and ought to be, let alone how such goals might be achieved. Perhaps, therefore, the analysis of schools as organisations should reflect this situation and recognise essentially problematic nature of goals in the organisational structure of the school.

Schools as Bureaucracies

If the identification of goals is regarded as one essential factor in understanding the organisational characteristics of schools then the nature of the structures designed to achieve those goals is equally important. The classical approach to an analysis of these structures has involved the application of the Weberian concept of bureaucracy which can be seen as an organisational response to an increase in the size and complexity of units of administration. Musgrove argues that, "Schools today have most of the salient characteristics of bureaucracies as described by Max Weber" (Musgrove, 1973, p. 163). The complex nature of the activities carried out by schools demands, it is argued, both the efficiency and rationality initially claimed by Weber for this form of organisation. Musgrove (1973), has suggested that in order to achieve its goals, the school's activities must be regulated by an impartially applied, consistent system of abstract rules and that the duties of members of staff must be officially prescribed, a division of labour maintained, and a hierarchy of authority resulting in a clear delineation of status and function between the various positions in the hierarchy established.

This view of beureaucracy has been somewhat modified by subsequent research (see Mouzelis, 1967), and a number of writers have emphasised the problems arising from trying to make use of Weber's approach to bureaucracy (e.g. Clignet, 1974; Albrow, 1970). Nevertheless a number of studies have treated the school as a bureaucracy (see Anderson, 1968, Bidewell, 1965 and Corwin, 1970). King (1973), argues that everyday experience of schools confirms that they do exhibit many of the characteristics contained in the original Weberian formulation whilst Reid (1978), after a discussion of this particular approach to bureaucracy, suggests that many schools do, in fact, approximate to it.

In so arguing such writers have tended somewhat to be uncritical in their application of organisation theory to schools. They attempt to analyse what goes on in schools as though both the activity and its institutional setting existed independently of the larger society, insulated from it and uninfluenced by it. They

tend to ignore the findings of case studies on the structure and culture of schools which support the view that schools create, through their own organisational framework, many of the problems of disorder and non-involvement which they experience (Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970). The tensions which might be produced within a school by emphasis on an impersonal application of rules are, as Bobbitt *et al.* (1974) suggests, serious enough to merit more detailed consideration than they often receive in this type of analysis. The same may be claimed for the conflict of values which can sometimes be observed between the administrator and the teacher who sees his position as a professional being challenged by the bureaucrat (Corwin, 1970). Under the influence of this relatively uncritical analysis schools have tended to be regarded as stable, predictable institutions within which office holders apply agreed rules and procedures in a consistent, impartial manner. By implication it is thought that the membership of the school can easily be identified or, as the systems approach might have it, the boundaries clearly defined (Sugerman, 1975). This, in turn, indicates that the relationship between members is clear, specific and based on a thoroughly understood technology for achieving desired goals. Relationships with the external environment tend to be stable and predictable, or, where this is not the case, can be coped with by the application of the relevant rules and procedures, although perhaps contingency theory suggests a more complex process than this is sometimes at work (see Tyler, 1973). On the evidence derived from this type of analysis an observer might expect, for example, that decisions formulated in schools would be the results of a logical and rational process in which those eligible to participate did so, and that the importance of the decision to be taken would be the fundamental determinant of the priority attributed to it by the potential decision makers. In some ways this could be a less than accurate analysis of what may be happening. It may also be positively misleading since it is predicated on the assumption that schools have more control over such factors as the environment within which they operate than perhaps is the case.

The Turbulent Environment

The view of organisations which attributes to them orderliness and rationality may be extremely attractive, especially to those working in schools. It promises consistency, predictability and a stable and secure framework within which to work. There is, however, increasing evidence that at least some organisations are not always like this. Cyert & March (1963), suggested that the overall rational pattern of behaviour in organisations based on a set of commonly held goals was frequently modified by a large number of departmental, rather than organisational, interests. Experience in schools leads to the belief that this is equally true of departments and groups in schools. This position is frequently reinforced by appeals to the notion of professional autonomy. A recent study of the introduction of mixed ability teaching in a comprehensive school illustrates several ways in which semi-autonomous departmental activity not only lead to a modification of the overall goal, but, in certain circumstances, to an almost complete reversal of policy (Bell, Pennington & Burridge, 1979). As a result of this and similar factors individuals often discover that they work in schools which are, organisationally, more complex, less stable and less understandable than they have previously assumed and than the sociology of education literature might suggest. Perhaps it needs to be recognised more explicitly that organisations, including schools, sometimes operate in a complex and unstable environment over which they exert only modest control and which is capable of

producing effects which penetrate the strongest and most selective of boundaries. Although most schools are not directly subject to the free range of market forces which create severe problems for some industrial organisations, many schools are now unable to disregard pressures emanating from their wider environment. They are no longer able to respond to the uncertainty which such pressures often bring by attempting to buffer themselves against the unforeseen or by gaining control over the source of the uncertainty and thus restoring stability. The external pressures are, in many cases, too strong for that. It has not proved possible, for example, for most schools to use either of these techniques to counteract the effect of restrictions in public expenditure on them. They have been subjected to pressures on their spending as LEAs have attempted to meet the demands from national and local politicians that all expenditure should be restricted in order to limit the increase in rates and conform to government cash limits. At the same time the costs of necessary books and material has drastically increased. Similarly schools have not always been able effectively to respond to the recent external criticism of content, method and objectives of education which has come from parents, politicians and industrialists. This criticism has found expression in, and among other things the establishment of, the Assessment of Performance Unit at the DES and the recommendations of the Taylor Report. These and other similar pressures have created a situation in which the internal organisation of the school has begun to resemble what has been called an anarchic organisation (Cohen, March & Olsen, 1972). Yet such characteristics as those displayed by an anarchic organisation rarely, if ever, feature in the sociological literature on schools.

The School as an Anarchic Organisation

The anarchic organisation is not, as its name might imply, a formless or unpredictable collection of individuals. Rather it is an organisation with a structure of its own which is partly determined by external pressures and partly a product of the nature of the organisation itself. It is anarchic in the sense that the relationship between goals, members and technology is not as clearly functional as conventional organisation theory indicates that it will be. Cohen *et al.* (1972) suggest that much organisational activity can best be understood as being characterised by unclear goals, unclear technology and fluid membership since such characteristics, it is argued, may be instrumental in creating a set of internal responses to perceive ambiguities. Cohen & March (1974) argued that many of the forty-two college principals which they studied for their report to the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education were frequently required to take decisions in situations in which considerable ambiguity surrounded goals, technology and participants. This work was followed by a series of case studies on such disparate areas of educational decision-making as the selection of a dean for an American university, desegregation decisions in San Francisco, the reorganisation of the University of Oslo and a study of a Danish Technical University (March & Olson, 1976). Such work has, I believe, begun to provide a theoretical framework within which it might be possible to re-examine the organisation of schools within the British education system, although, as yet, this re-examination is at a purely exploratory level.

The external demands which are made on schools from a wide variety of sources often conflict with each other, especially at a time of limited and even declining resources. This, taken with the different views about the nature and content of education which already exists within the teaching profession, has led in many

schools to a situation in which it is not very clear what the goals of the school are. Different members of the school may perceive different goals or attribute different priorities to the same goals or even be unable to define goals which have any operational meaning. Thus whilst it is commonly expected that those who work in schools should have some overall purpose it is likely that the organisational context of many schools actually renders this either impossible or very difficult. Hence schools face an ambiguity of purpose, the result of which is that the achievement of goals which are educational in any real sense has ceased to be central to the functioning of the school. Thus husbanding scarce resources tends to have priority over the facilitation of learning, uncertainty generated by falling pupil numbers overshadows much of the work done with existing pupils and a common sense of direction is frequently not evident in the teaching which does take place. Furthermore it has often been found difficult to specify a constant set of educational goals. They have tended to change over time and may even vary between different parts of the school organisation. They are frequently stated in terms which are notoriously difficult to translate into action and, whilst goals may be imputed to schools by observing the behaviour of a range of people within them, this imputation itself tends to be as ambiguous as the goals since it is extremely difficult to obtain general agreement on it.

Given, then, that the education goals are ambiguous and may well not occupy a focal position in school life, the way in which schools attempt to fulfil these goals is equally unclear. Even when the goals are expressed in the most general of terms related to the facilitating of learning, different educational and political ideologies may lead teachers to approach their tasks in a number of ways. More fundamentally, however, teachers are often unsure about what it is they want their pupils to learn, about what it is the pupils have learned about and how, if at all, learning has actually taken place. The learning process is inadequately understood and therefore pupils may not always be learning effectively whilst the basic technology available in schools is often not understood because its purposes are only vaguely recognised. In such a situation new teachers do not so much acquire the skills of teaching as learn how to conform to the normative and formal structures in order to reduce the demands made upon them by the organisation to acceptable proportions. Since the related technology is so unclear the processes of teaching and learning are clouded in ambiguity. This produces a range of situations between teachers, and between teachers and pupils, within which rules and procedures cannot be operated with bureaucratic consistency, impartiality and predictability because the various parties involved do not perceive with any degree of clarity what is expected of them and what may justifiably be expected of others.

Thus, although the schools manage to exist as entities their processes are not really understood by members. They operate on the basis of procedures such as trial and error, learning from the accidents of past experience and pragmatic inventions of necessity. This situation, itself, may be unidentified, with the result that some schools manage to operate *as if* the technology were clear. The participants share notions about cause-and-effect relationships in educational activity which are used to make judgements about those activities and to take decisions about the nature and direction of changes. When situations arise which are not easily accounted for within this framework such situations are regarded as abnormal. This can lead to the creation or reinforcement of boundaries between schools and the wider community as teachers fall back to a defensive position from which they perhaps use their claim to professional autonomy to fight off demands for accountability. Thus

because those within schools do not fully understand their own technology and so do not appreciate its weakness they may be in danger of attempting to turn schools into increasingly closed institutions which try to shut out parents and other interested parties. This is equally true of relationships inside schools between departments as Bell *et al.* (1979) have shown. Some departments felt that the changes were either too difficult to implement or were not producing the expected improvements in pupil performances. They reacted by attempting to operate as semi-autonomous units within the larger school in an effort to shut out other teachers who, they felt, might be unduly critical of their 'failures'. This happened in spite of the fact that it was pointed out that the goal of improving the overall standard of pupil performance and the technology used, the implementation of mixed ability teaching, were not directly connected in a causal relationship. This general failure to understand the technology on which schools are based results, therefore, not only in an inability to make the most of it but also in the attribution of expectations to the technology which it is too diffuse and weak to fulfil. This situation, when not appreciated, may produce unfortunate consequences for the schools, internal and external relationships.

This situation is exacerbated by the conflict which may be produced by the attempts to limit access to the school at a time when the actual membership of the school appears to be in a fluid state. This is true in two senses. First, the school consists of groups of pupils and teachers all of whom make a wide range of demands on the organisation. By their very nature schools gain and lose large numbers of pupils each year and, until recently, they also experienced a high turnover in teaching staff. The interests of this changing group, and their ensuing demands, are not pre-determined and therefore the best ways to meet these demands are not always predictable. Schools are thus open to a wide variety of possible demands and influences which may effect their activities. The recent developments in community education have resulted in another form of fluidity in the membership of some schools. Membership is no longer limited to teachers and pupils. It might include local pensioners, youth groups, sports clubs and a whole variety of other members of the public at large. At any one time it may prove extremely difficult to say who belongs to the school and who does not. Membership of the school is also fluid in the sense that the extent to which individuals are willing and able to participate in its activities. Their degree of commitment may change over time and according to the nature of the activity itself. In this way schools are peopled by participants who wander in and out. The notion of membership is thus ambiguous and therefore it becomes extremely difficult to attribute responsibility to a particular member of the school for some areas of the schools activities whilst, over other areas, there exist considerable conflicts of interests.

Thus it can be argued that when these characteristics are found in any organisation, including schools, then the predominant ethos within that organisation is unpredictability (Turner, 1977). The more traditional forms of organisational analysis will, therefore, tend to confuse rather than clarify and conceal more than they reveal. It may, for example, not be apparent from such an analysis that once the school is regarded as an unpredictable organisation existing within a turbulent environment then certain skills are required by those working in the school. An individual must be highly adaptive, creative and flexible in order to react to constantly changing situations which cannot be predicted. He will need to have full discretion and full delegated powers from his superiors in order to cope with such situations. It is likely that the decisions made by such an individual will be short

term and made in an attempt to respond to immediate demands and, as such, may be subject to rapid modification. For such responses to be understood the traditional notion of the school as an hierarchical decision-making structure with a horizontal division into departments and a vertical division into authority levels needs to be abandoned. Such a conceptualisation is unsuitable for the analysis of an anarchic organisation. The fundamental importance of unclear technology, fluid membership and the problematic nature and position of educational goals has to be accorded due recognition in any sociology of the school.

Anarchic Schools and Organisational Choice

It has been suggested above that the more traditional approaches to the sociology of the school provide a particular set of expectations about two schools' functions and, in particular, about how decisions are taken in a situation of an unclear technology, fluid membership and problematic goals, the taking of decisions and the solution of the problems cannot be based on some notion of common goals to be implemented by the application of a known and understood set of techniques. Such problems are more likely to consist of linking together problems, solutions, participants and choices in conditions of ambiguity such that there are no criteria for making the connections. Hence the ideal solution and its related problem may not be linked. If, for example, the problem with which the school is concerned is to raise standards there may be a whole range of possible solutions to that problem. The one adopted may depend more on the amount of time and energy devoted to its solution or on some partially understood notion of the relationship between learning and teaching, than on any concept of the 'ideal' solution. The area of unpredictability refers mainly to the way in which these factors are combined rather than to their long- or short-term feasibility. Once the possibility is recognised of seeing patterns in the apparently unpredictable and disordered processes of making choices when goals are unclear, technology is uncertain and the cast of participants changes over time, then it becomes clear that not only has this anarchy an identifiable structure of its own but that this should be the focus of concern for the study of the school as an organisation. In any organisation in which it is not always possible to base decision-making on some perception of common goals, decisions will be taken in some other way (Cohen & March, 1974). The ideal solution and the problem may be happily united but this is not likely to be the most common procedure. Neither will a series of such decisions necessarily be consistent with each other since there is no common point of reference. Decisions are more likely to be made by 'flight' or by 'oversight' (Cohen *et al.*, 1972).

In a school which is concerned, for example, with attempting to raise standards there may exist a vast array of other problems, some of which will be related to the question of standards and some of which will not. The staff may be unwilling to teach in particular ways, use particular materials or group children according to certain criteria. Time-tabling may present a serious difficulty because of shortage of staff in specialist areas or because of the conflicting demands being made by different departments. Raising standards will, therefore, be but one of a number of problems confronting a similar set of people at the same time. As a result solutions may be chosen and attached to problems unsuccessfully, remaining there until some more attractive choice comes along (flight). So the solution to raising standards may be thought to be the introduction of mixed ability teaching (Bell *et al.*, 1979). Perhaps with experience it is seen that this is not the hoped-for solution and that it

has exacerbated some other problems. However the failed solution is likely to remain in operation much longer than might be supposed if the criteria of rational planning were to apply because the mixed ability teaching and the problem which it was meant to solve, that of improving standards, have become linked in the ambiguous environment of the organised anarchy and will remain so until sufficient people have sufficient time to examine other possible solutions to that problem. Similarly the choice of mixed ability teaching as a solution to the problem of how to raise standards, whether it is successful or not, may have been made without concern for other problems which exist at the same time (decision by oversight). This would mean that those problems would be ignored in an attempt to solve one other problem. This might result in a whole range of other problems, such as those already outlined, attaching themselves to the introduction of mixed ability teaching as a solution, although the choice of solution was made without reference to these other problems.

Ground Rules for Anarchic Schools

Once the implication of decision-making processes such as flight and oversight are recognised then the whole approach to the analysis of such processes needs to be re-examined. It is clear that ambiguity of this type does have an identifiable pattern. It is also clear that sometimes the attempt to solve a particular problem serves purposes other than seeking answers to immediate problems. Having thus identified the nature of these methods of making choices it is possible to develop a sociology of the school which not only embraces the recognition of such anarchic tendencies but which does not place undue emphasis on order, stability, practicability and rationality and which can provide practical guidelines for those working in schools. For example it might enable schools to discover ways of coping with some of the more ambiguous social problems, problems for which there are no clear solutions, to which schools are increasingly being asked to provide responses. It might also help those involved in decision-making, or those wishing to be involved, to minimise the impact of flight and oversight since an analysis of decision-making in organised anarchies which would provide the basis for such a sociology of the school indicates that those people who take part in decision-making not only bring with them potential solution to problems but also bring problems seeking solutions.

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