Myths, Ceremonies, and Power-Dependence Relationships: Organizational Theory and Charter School Autonomy

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Public school systems grant charter schools significant autonomy from public school system oversight. This article employs organizational theory and a case study to argue that this autonomy is compromised by school and school system activities as well as by dynamics between the school and external organizations, including school system governing bodies. Furthermore, it suggests that this autonomy exists as a dynamic (rather than static) state and affects strategic choices made by leaders at both the school and school system levels, thereby altering the nature of the autonomy itself.

The purpose of this article is to explore the institutional environment of a specific Chicago Public Schools (CPS) charter high school, here described as School X in order to protect the confidentiality of school faculty, staff, students, and families. The article considers (1) the extent to which charter schools actually operate autonomously from oversight by CPS and community members; and (2) whether this actual, or operative, autonomy is aligned with charter schools' formal, or stated, autonomy (Bedeian and Zammuto, 1991), as it is set forth in CPS policy (CPS, n.d.).

The article borrows the words "operative" and "stated" from Arthur Bedeian and Raymond Zammuto's work on organizational goals (1991). In that work, "operative" refers to what actually happens in organizational practice, and "stated" refers to what is set forth in such organizational documents as mission statements, policies, and procedures. The context here (autonomy) is different than that in Bedeian and Zammuto's (1991) work on goals, but the terms aptly describe a potential gap between stated intentions and operative reality.

PROBLEM

This article examines the hypothesis that charter school autonomy is not a static state determined solely by written word (i.e., CPS policy). It asserts that autonomy is instead shaped dynamically through interorganizational relationships in a charter school's environment. Furthermore, these interorganizational relationships, steeped in power and dependence, can render actual, or operative, autonomy (i.e., what really happens day-to-day) different from formal, or stated, autonomy (i.e., what policy makers write). To support these claims, the article explores charter school autonomy through the lens of organizational theory frameworks developed by John Meyer and Brian Rowan (1977) and Yeheskel Hasenfeld (1983).

BACKGROUND

In 1994, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley launched Renaissance 2010 (Ren10), an ambitious public education reform plan that aims, by the year 2010, to close low-performing and low-enrollment public schools, opening 100 new, smaller, and more autonomous schools in their places. According to the policy, each new school will be managed according to one of three school management models: charter, performance, and contract (CPS, n.d.).

   This article focuses solely on charter schools, as School X is a charter school. Of the three school management models, charter schools are granted the most formal (i.e., stated) autonomy when compared to the other two models (CPS, n.d.). Given that Ren10 schools receive public funds according to the same per-pupil formula as traditional (i.e., non-Ren10) schools (CPS, 2007), the granting of this autonomy is quite significant. To some critics, this autonomy results in a problematic private use of public funds without public oversight (Lipman, 2005).

   Under CPS policy, charter schools are exempt from two sources of oversight. First, CPS policy provides charter schools with nearly complete freedom from CPS oversight (CPS, 2007). According to the policy, charter schools are organized as nonprofit organizations. They are not accountable to CPS beyond initial charter approval and regularly scheduled charter renewal processes (CPS, 2007). This leaves charter schools free to make decisions concerning personnel, finances, management, curricula, and programmatic functions. For example, charter schools are not required to hire from the teachers union, to hire certified professionals, to pay union-level wages, to offer union-level benefits, to utilize CPS programs (i.e., food and custodial services), or to follow CPS hiring protocols (i.e., counselor-to-student ratios).

Second, charter schools are also exempt from traditional forms of community oversight. In traditional (i.e., non-Ren10) CPS schools, this oversight is entrusted to democratically elected local school councils (LSCs) that have complete hiring and budgetary oversight. Charter schools, however, avoid democratically elected LSCs as well as their oversight. Instead, charter schools create and are overseen by their own nonprofit boards, which vote members on and off at will (CPS, 2007). As a result, charter schools determine who performs oversight duties, as well as the nature, rigor, and significance of these activities.

SCHOOL X

School X is one of Chicago's first charter schools. It is located in a very low-income neighborhood. According to School X student records, approximately three-quarters of School X students live either in the neighborhood or in the immediately adjacent neighborhoods (as defined by zip codes).

Per CPS policy, charter school enrollment is open to all students, who are admitted via a blind, audited lottery, and no admissions tests are used (CPS, 2007). The only exception to the lottery process at School X is that siblings of current and former students are granted admission.

Framework 1: Meyer and Rowan's Myths and Ceremonies

Two conceptual frameworks provide a helpful lens though which to better understand the functioning of charter school autonomy. The first, from Meyer and Rowan (1977), offers the concepts of organizational myths and ceremonies. In Meyer and Rowan's analysis, the authors assert that formal organizational structures (such as policies, programs, techniques, services, and even products) are myths akin to stories. Organizational leaders employ these stories in an attempt to describe cause-and-effect relationships that will lead their organizations to successful outcomes and overall survival. Myths are reinforced through organizational ceremonies, such as celebrations, announcements, awards, and assessments, which aim to attest to the validity of these myths (1977, p. 340). This article hypothesizes that charter school autonomy is an example of such a myth.

According to Meyer and Rowan (1977, p. 346–48), myths and ceremonies are highly reflective of and influenced by forces that are external to the organization but within its environment. This environment can include the court system, peer organizations, regulating organizations, educational systems, job training systems, current technology, public opinion, and social prestige.

In promoting myths and ceremonies, organizations simultaneously adapt to their environments and contribute to the future shape of them. For School X, CPS and its policies are examples of external forces.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) note that myths and ceremonies often have very little to do with an organization's day-to-day activities. The authors sharply distinguish the formal organization (made up of structures, or myths and their associated ceremonies) from the informal organization (made up of activities, or what actually happens).

Regardless of the match (or mismatch) between an organization's myths and its activities, these myths are nonetheless important to organizational survival. Organizational leaders adopt myths and reinforce them with ceremonies in order to better grapple with the complexities and instabilities inherent in modern society and, especially, in the organization's environment (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, 346–48). Through the use of myths, organization leaders seek to (1) garner external legitimacy from peer organizations and authorizing bodies, thereby enabling the organization to (2) secure resources, which are mobilized to (3) capitalize upon opportunities, and, when this is done successfully, to (4) increase the organization's chances of survival in a highly competitive environment.

The case of School X illustrates Meyer and Rowan's (1977) framework well in three ways. First, charter school autonomy is a myth produced in School X's environment through the written words of CPS policy (CPS, n.d.). This myth is then reinforced through the practices of other institutions in School X's environment (e.g., other Illinois charter schools, corporations, and foundations that fund charter schools). These reinforcing practices include such ceremonies as the issuing of foundation reports and corporate press releases, the holding of events of public record (e.g., CPS board meetings), and the making of public statements by opinion leaders (such as the mayor), all extolling the virtues of charter school autonomy.

Second, this case illustrates how myths and ceremonies are not always aligned with operative reality. For example, CPS officials pressured School X into abandoning its innovative senior management model and hiring a traditional principal to lead the school. This pressure was applied in an attempt to address the stagnant standardized test scores of School X students.

Third, this case shows how the upholding of myths and ceremonies can be critical to organizational success and survival, even if a gap separates operative reality from these myths and ceremonies. For example, upholding the myth of charter school autonomy is important to School X's survival, as the school's largest funder (CPS, through the per-pupil allocation given to all public

schools) is firmly invested in the myths embedded in Ren10 policies; charter school autonomy is one such myth (CPS, n.d.). Challenging this myth could cost School X some of its legitimacy with CPS, thereby endangering the school's charter, critical financial resources (the per-pupil allocation), and the ability to capitalize upon other opportunities for survival (such as competing for corporate and foundation grants).

Framework 2: Hasenfeld's Exchange Relationships and Power-Dependence Relations

Hasenfeld (1983) also examines the organizational and environmental relationships described by Meyer and Rowan (1977). In doing so, he introduces the concepts of exchange relationships and power-dependence relations. Hasenfeld (1983) defines an exchange relationship as one between two or more organizations that engage in the transfer of resources for the benefit of each. He explains that one organization becomes dependent upon another to the extent that (1) the organization controls a resource needed by the other and (2) this needed resource is not readily available elsewhere in the environment.

This dependence then determines the balance of power between the organizations, leading to a power-dependence relation. In Hasenfeld's (1983) model, organizations are mutually dependent upon each other. However, through an imbalance in resource provision and control, one organization can become more powerful than the other. As the power of one organization grows, so grows the ability of its leaders to determine the terms of the exchange relationship.

Power-dependence relations exist and function within a complex network that links organizations in the environment. This environment is the arena in which various organizations interact. For example, it may be a geographical location (e.g., Chicago) or an organizational construct (e.g., the CPS district in which a school is located). The environment includes recipients, consumers, competing organizations, providers of fiscal resources, providers of clients, providers of authority, providers of legitimation, and providers of complementary services.

Hasenfeld (1983) argues that power-dependence relations are dynamic in that these relations change as the various organizations in an environment alter strategies and behaviors. The School X case is easily considered within Hasenfeld's (1983) framework.

First, CPS and School X are engaged in an exchange relationship. As one participant in the relationship, CPS has control over two key resources needed by School X. The first resource is the legitimacy inherent in the charter approval and renewal processes. The second resource is the per-pupil funding

provided by CPS as long as charter status is preserved. School X could not operate at all without the first resource and most likely could not survive without the second.

In turn, School X has control over two key resources needed by CPS. The first resource is the operational capacity to run a successful and safe CPS high school in School X's neighborhood, where the current non-charter high schools have long been documented as substandard and unsafe. This resource is critical to demonstrating the success and potential of CPS's school reform strategies, including Ren10.

The second resource, ironically, is funding. School X's board shares membership with the board of one of Chicago's most wealthy family foundations, which happens to be one of Ren10's most stalwart and public supporters. This provides CPS access to the foundation's financial resources as well as to contacts and legitimacy that enable CPS to successfully attract other financial resources. Thus, School X controls funding for CPS at the same time that CPS is funding School X.

This case illustrates Hasenfeld's (1983) model in a second way. School X and CPS are engaged in a dynamic power-dependence relationship, such that changes in the environment alter the balance of power and dependence between the organizations. In this case, CPS offered the opportunity for school operators (charters and others) to open a new school in a CPS facility in School X's neighborhood. School X submitted a proposal, thus adding to its dependence on CPS beyond the routine charter renewal process for its existing school. This shift in dependence enabled CPS to assert additional power over School X, pressuring the school's leaders to abandon its innovative senior management model and to hire a traditional principal leader (as previously mentioned).

FROM FRAMEWORKS TO STRATEGIES

The frameworks discussed in this article extend beyond organizational characteristics and interorganizational dynamics. They also provide a lens through which to better understand the strategic choices made by organizational leaders at both the school and school system levels.

For example, one strategy observed by Meyer and Rowan (1977) is that of decoupling. Decoupling occurs when organizational leaders purposefully create or allow a situation in which myths and operative realities do not match. In employing this strategy, the leaders uphold the prevailing myth even while endorsing practices that are not aligned with this myth. They may do so

because both the myth and the practices (that do not align with it) are critical to organizational survival.

This is clearly the situation in which School X finds itself. School X leaders know that they are not completely autonomous from CPS oversight. This awareness is demonstrated in the appointment of a new principal in response to CPS pressure. At the same time, School X leaders must publicly affirm charter school autonomy because CPS reform strategy and foundation support are both predicated upon it. School X also is dependent upon CPS and these funders for legitimation, resources, and survival. Thus, by saying one thing while doing another, School X leaders decouple their pronouncements from their practices, doing so in pursuit of the school's prosperity and survival.

Hasenfeld (1983) also observes multiple strategies for interorganizational work. He notes that, in the context of power-dependence relations, if the power is evenly distributed between two organizations, the organizations employ cooperative strategies in order to exchange resources and accomplish mutual goals. This describes well the strategy employed by CPS and School X prior to School X's proposal to CPS to open a new school.

Hasenfeld (1983) notes, however, that if power is not evenly distributed, the more powerful organization employs an authoritative strategy through which its leaders dictate the terms of the exchange relationship. This strategy was employed by CPS when it pressured School X to hire a new principal. School X's application to open a new school increased its dependence upon CPS, shifting the balance of power in CPS's favor and allowing CPS to infringe upon School X's autonomy.

CONCLUSION

In this article, organizational theory is used to question the reality of charter school autonomy. As the case example of School X illustrates, even when autonomy exists in writing, it is often compromised in reality.

This observation is not an indictment of charter school autonomy. Rather, in this article, autonomy can be seen as rendering the system more flexible and (hopefully) more effective. For example, by operating a safe high school in a neighborhood where no traditional (non-charter) high school has succeeded in accomplishing the same, School X represents an example of how this flexibility can lead to positive outcomes for students.

However, this article also makes note of the darker side of charter school autonomy. Lacking formal authority to oversee School X's activities, CPS had to wait for a shift in its power-dependence relationship with the school (in the

form of the school's application to open a new school) before it could pressure School X to address the stagnating standardized test scores of its students. This situation illustrates how charter school autonomy can result in systematic inflexibility that leads to negative outcomes for students.

In challenging the notion that charter schools are indeed autonomous, this article opens the possibility of discussing when and how charter school autonomy is connected to positive outcomes for students, and when it is not. Following from that discussion, ideally, is a deeper understanding of how schools and school systems can manage such elements as autonomy, its accompanying myths and ceremonies, the exchange relationships between schools and school systems, and balances of power and dependence, in order to achieve improved student outcomes, which are the ultimate goal.

For example, autonomy could be granted to schools, charter and non-charter alike, based on past and current student outcomes rather than on organizational status (e.g., Ren10 school, charter school). Furthermore, autonomy could be granted categorically and incrementally, perhaps in tiers (e.g., tier 1 autonomy, tier 2 autonomy) or programmatically. Schools that have earned autonomy might be awarded sums of money or full-time positions to be utilized outside of usual budgetary and union constraints. Such strategies would make autonomy something to be earned, not something to be granted, and the most successful schools would earn opportunities for increased levels of autonomy.

Limitations

The author notes that the purpose of this paper is not to determine causal relationships or generate findings worthy of broader generalization. Rather, this is a single-case study intended only to identify patterns worthy of further inquiry.

Furthermore, while the scope of this article precluded an extensive discussion of how Meyer and Rowan's (1977) and Hasenfeld's (1983) frameworks could impact organizational and interorganizational strategies as well as student outcomes, a brief foray into this territory was provided in order to present the pragmatic quality of these frameworks and their potential for practical use.

Implications for Future Research

One potential area for future research is to examine the extent to which charter school leaders consider issues of power and dependence in making strategic decisions. In following this research strand, researchers could seek out correlations between these leaders' decision-making styles and a variety of student outcomes.

A similar research strategy could seek out correlations between the extent of operative autonomy that school leaders exercise and, again, a variety of student outcomes. In essence, both of these strategies for future research could help policy makers and school leaders to better understand the relationship between school-level autonomy and student performance.

A more extensive and rigorous control study could seek out causal relationships between charter school autonomy and student performance. Such a study might examine whether student outcomes are related to differing levels of operative autonomy at the charter school level and whether student outcomes might be linked to the decision-making styles of the school leaders operationalizing this autonomy.

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NOTE

[1] This and other information about School X, and about its relationship with CPS, is derived from the author's experiences during a year-long internship at School X.

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