

Understanding and Administering Educational Organizations: The Contribution of Greenfield's "Alternative Theory"

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Some contemporary writers have strongly attacked traditional theories of educational administration, but few with the vehemence and public recognition of T.B. Greenfield. The alternative view of educational organizations proposed by Greenfield has attracted the attention of administrators, theorists, and researchers around the world. By considering this perspective in relation to three major systems views of schools and other organizations, the author examines the contribution of Greenfield's "Alternative Theory" to current educational administration practice and scholarship.

Les théories traditionnelles d'administration scolaire ont connu de nombreux critiques, parmi lesquels T.B. Greenfield. Les vues de l'auteur ont retenu l'attention d'administrateurs, de théoriciens et de chercheurs à travers le monde. Cet article a pour but de comparer la perspective de Greenfield à trois autres théories des systèmes et de souligner ainsi la contribution qu'apporte la théorie de l'auteur à la pratique et à la recherche dans le domaine de l'administration scolaire.

For a decade and a half, T.B. Greenfield has criticized conventional theories of educational administration. Arising out of that criticism, he has advanced an "Alternative Theory" (1985) as "a 'new' and useful framework for the study of organizations" (1980, p. 27) — one that is thought to be more appropriate for today's school administrators as well as for scholars in this field. Using Scott's (1981) *rational, natural, and open* systems classificatory scheme of organizations as a framework, Greenfield's perspective is compared and contrasted with the three major systems views in order to highlight the nature and extent of the alternative theory's contribution to the theory and practice of administration in schools and other educational settings.

Greenfield's "Alternative Theory" of Educational Organizations

Greenfield is a leading critic of the systems perspective to which many theorists and administrators have long subscribed. As a substitute for this traditional stance, Greenfield (1982) presents another conception of what constitutes an "organization." He describes his theory as one that "rejects group mind and rejects an overarching social reality, thought to be beyond human control and

outside the will, intention and action of the individual” (p. 4). In support of this alternative theory, Greenfield focuses on four major aspects of schools and other educational organizations about which he believes theory has been deficient.

First, attention is paid to the humanness of organizations. Greenfield (1985) speaks of organizational participants’ “creativity of the self” and “capacity to choose,” “conform . . . imperfectly,” and “oppose other people” (p. 5248). In doing so, he warns of the individuality and unpredictability of organizational behavior — that it can be neither constrained nor satisfactorily explained by general theories.

Second, Greenfield’s reference not only to the invented but to the illusory nature of organizational life is also significant. He contends that “we may better understand organizations if we conceive [of] them as being an invented reality, an illusion that rests on a kind of social sleight-of-hand” (1980, p. 27). That organizations are created by individuals is obvious and well-accepted; Scott (1981), for example, incorporates this view in his definition of organizations. However, Greenfield contends that the social “structures” of organizations are nonexistent — no more than figments or constructions of individuals’ imaginations. At the same time, he does acknowledge that forms often accepted by individuals are created for them — perhaps by administrators — and we allow ourselves to “believe the illusions before us” (1985, p. 5248). The alternative theory nevertheless presents individual behavior and administrative action as substantially uncertain, directed just as readily by responses to fellow participants’ demands and needs as by traditional role expectations.

A third element of Greenfield’s theory concerns the power that shapes organization members’ perceptions and behavior. Rejecting traditional theories of hierarchical power, he stresses the capacity of individuals to withdraw their consent and dissolve administrative control. Individuals’ rights and wills are seen as overriding leaders’ exercise of power; if organization members’ welfare is prejudiced by administrators’ decisions, or if administrators lose credibility by pursuing personal or immoral goals, then power may be withdrawn by those members.

Finally, the alternative theory conceives of all organizational values as no more than a conglomeration of personal values. “Organizations . . . are based on ideas, values, and individual action” (1980, p. 34). Of outstanding importance, then, is administrators’ attention to attitudes, perceptions, interests, and ambitions of individual members; these features are administrators’ only guides to the measure of cooperation that may be expected from subordinates.

The worth of this alternative theory can be assessed by comparing and contrasting it with three conventional systems perspectives.

The Rational Systems Perspective.

Greenfield’s standpoint is diametrically opposed to the scientific, or rational, perspective on organizations. The rational school places priority on structures within organizations. It concentrates attention upon formal definition of social positions and role relationships and upon coordination of effort toward specific

organizational goals. Rational theorists' research focuses on analysis of variations within and among the normative (expected) structures of different organizations.

At its most extreme, the rational perspective has no concern for rationality of goals — only for their clear specification in order that organizations may be structured and decision making directed accordingly. Greenfield attacks this apparent neglect of the morality of organizational goals and behavior. He believes that schools and other organization structures tend to become vehicles for imposing individual — supposedly organizational — interests of bureaucratic leaders. Moreover, acting in the name of organizations, administrators detach themselves from moral responsibility for their decisions and actions: "The required allegiance to the organization removes notions of right and wrong The individual is . . . no longer author of his act, but agent for a larger reality" (1982, p. 6). Indeed, "rationality in decision-making has become a cover for the powerful administrator: science and its rationality provide the ultimately persuasive and irrefutable excuse for the abdication of personal choice and responsibility" (1986, p. 63). Greenfield thereby reminds administrators and scholars of the need for expression of individual choice and opposition — and morality — in educational administration. Indeed, Perrow (1979), a supporter of rationality, concedes that moral organization goals may be displaced by those of rational, "amoral" (Greenfield, 1985, p. 5249) managers for whom power and other personal ends have priority. The scientific perspective disregards this possibility of administrative exploitation, or "feathering the nest" (Perrow, 1979, p. 16). So Greenfield's reminder to school administrators to re-examine their school goals and administrative actions is salutary.

According to rational theory, clear prescription of formal position roles and strict formulation of rules facilitate standardization and regulation, so organizational behavior becomes predictable and productive. The role structure is clearly visible and it can be examined and altered at will. As a "mechanical" structure, then, this malleable organization can be manipulated to improve performance. Formalization of role relationships creates and maintains power for administrators, and minimizes the impact of social relationships and attitudes on the work situation. Personal preferences and dislikes are thereby discouraged from interfering with rational performance of tasks.

Adherents of the bureaucracy approach, in particular, also emphasize hierarchy of authority, rules, and procedures to control and direct decisions and action, impersonal treatment of individuals, fixed division of labor, and technical competence (Sousa & Hoy, 1981). In Weber's (1967) "ideal type" conception of bureaucratic organization, power to control behavior is vested in an authority structure in which individuals' capacity to command is defined by their hierarchical positions; they can expect obedience because of their status. Therefore, universally applicable principles of administration can be devised to guide leaders in directing the behavior of subordinates, while planning and decision making become procedural tasks which are capable of clear definition.

This contrasts sharply with Greenfield's conception of organizational power and behavior. As participants in imaginary constructions, individuals have a

capacity and the right to willfully disobey rules and thereby to confer or withdraw power. The fact that power is so tenuous highlights the reality of individual choice and action. To believe that organizational behavior can be molded as desired, then, is to engage in self-deception. Individual action is substantially unpredictable; it is guided not merely by rational hierarchical prescription but by personal motives and values. In essence, formal structure is relegated to a battle for cooperation and control, competing with individual and social group goals, interests, and morality. Leaders are constantly confronted by these competing interests, attitudes, and demands from organizational participants; as a result, it is unrealistic to think that generalizable prescriptions can be formulated to make administration more effective.

Greenfield (1986) also criticizes rationalists for anthropomorphising organizations. By reifying them — even worse, by attributing to them personality that becomes “more important than the people within [them]” (p. 66) — it is said that rational theorists are blinded to the inconvenient but unavoidable presence of conflicting individual perceptions and behavior. Organizations are not separate beings, but collections of persons each of whom has an individual conception of the way relationships and behavior do and should take place. Organization is personal. Thus, if we wish to see organizational reality, we must attend to the unique behavior and perceptions of individuals — not to some mythical, externally defined, generalizable “reality” of hierarchy and formally dictated interaction. Greenfield therefore warns administrators against relying upon theories of social behavior that are founded upon empirically validated statements of “fact”:

Any administrator who foolishly sets out to base his action on facts alone will find himself swept away in a maelstrom of action created by those who will not yield their human capacity and — as they see it — their right to decide, to choose, to impose value on the world, and to assert self and will. (1980, p. 43)

This conflict of theoretical opinion has clear implications for organizational research and improvement in schools. As Allison explains:

Defenders of the established paradigm argue that schools should be approached as if they were clocks: predictable, solid, social mechanisms — the structures and processes of which can be modeled, measured, and predicted On the other hand, proponents of phenomenology appear to be suggesting that schools are in some way akin to clouds: ephemeral and objectively unknowable phenomena that can only be understood through the perceptions of those who create, modify, and maintain them by way of actions, beliefs, and values. (1983, p. 9)

Allison highlights the apparent irreconcilability of these two stances on the social reality of organizations. On the other hand, it is argued later in this article that a realistic approach to the study of educational organizations should acknowledge both views.

The Natural Systems Perspective.

Natural systems theorists posit a view of organizations which departs from the

formalization, goal specificity, and prescription of the scientific, rational school. Instead, these theorists stress a model of informal organizational relationships. Unlike the carefully designed structures of the rational perspective, natural structures are perceived to evolve more spontaneously: social groups develop from a myriad of interactions, associations, personal ends and attitudes of individuals who are thrown together in the organizational setting. Organizations are viewed as social groups or collectivities, and formalization and goals are de-emphasized; behavioral structures, informal regulation, and social needs take precedence. Indeed, the social structure of a school or other educational organization is concerned for its own support and protection, and goals can be adapted to suit changing needs of the organization's collective membership.

Proponents of this view regard efforts to mechanize, or program, participants' behavior as counter-productive; such efforts quash initiative and self-confidence, fostering apathy and organizational inefficiency. Indeed, one branch of this perspective — the human relations school — focuses special attention on informal groups as the basis for cooperative action. As shared goals and group behavior prescribe and control individual behavior, organizations (in effect, administrators) can utilize a variety of strategies for encouraging convergence of organizational and social goals and engaging cooperative effort. Recognizing the powerful need for members to satisfy their collective needs, devices such as participatory and delegatory decision making, job enrichment and job enlargement motivate individuals and foster commitment to (administrators') desired goals. As Kaplan and Tausky note, underlying this view of organizations is a belief that "social control is more effective since it then rests, in part, on the self-control of the participants" (1977, pp. 171-172). At the same time, it should be acknowledged that these writers cast doubt upon the effectiveness of human relations techniques for promoting cooperative goals and effort.

Greenfield questions not only the natural perspective's capacity for controlling behavior but the morality of such manipulative — even if not overtly coercive — strategies. Once again his stance on individual values, ends, and actions places the alternative view in opposition to an established theory of organizations. Greenfield rejects that theory's respect for individual commitment to the "shared" purposes of others. Warning that individuals' concern for personal welfare should and does take precedence over goals formulated by consensus, he criticizes the natural perspective's adherence to a pattern or structure of controllable human attitudes and behaviors. Greenfield regards that structure as a myth, a convenient creation of those who amorally strive to wield power over others, and he highlights the right and power of other individuals to destroy order by refusing to acquiesce.

The Open Systems Perspective.

The 1960s saw a reversion to rationality, but in a new form — open systems theory of organizations. This view emphasizes control but conceives of new techniques, such as accountability, for achieving that purpose. Essential to this perspective is recognition of the situational impact of environments in which

organizations operate, as well as the implications of differing organization size, technology, and formal structure. More recently, open systems theory has progressed to a natural approach, emphasizing the presence of personal involvement in organizations and the coalitions which form and influence organizational behavior. Different theorists have highlighted the significance of bargaining about system goals, political struggles with and between other related systems, the degenerative nature of organizations, and the need to match structure with organizational and environmental demands.

Greenfield has a fundamental quarrel with both of these stances. Rationality, whether open or closed, neglects values. Moreover, both of these open schools treat organizations as systems, implying coordination of individual activities and subjugation of individual wills to system goals. Open theory's preoccupation with predictable, manipulable, biological processes, as with its predecessor, closed system theory, directly opposes the alternative theory.

Over recent years, a further theoretical dimension has developed in connection with professional organizations such as schools. Mintzberg (1979) argues that a professional organization tolerates only limited structure, preventing behavior from being more than partially predetermined. At the same time, the influence of professional associations promotes considerable conformity among organization members. Teachers, for example, retain professional independence in the privacy of their classrooms; but, in spite of this uncertainty and the need for individual judgment, standardized preservice and inservice training tends to make their organizational behavior broadly similar and predictable. As Mintzberg (1979) further observes, professional organizations are usually flat structures with little need for middle technostructures, yet they do possess some bureaucratic elements. Nevertheless, members jealously guard their independence by democratizing the administrative structure. As a result, substantial power resides at the bottom of the hierarchy, where technical knowledge and skill facilitate the exercise of influence.

School administrators are faced with the consequences of this diffuse power structure: the task of administration demands not so much hierarchical authority as influence through negotiation, conflict resolution, interaction with external interests, and assistance with teachers' administrative duties. Informal power, once earned in these ways, can be used by administrators to change organizational behavior and goals "in incremental steps" (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 365).

Meyer and Rowan (1978), who also devote attention to the problem of professional organizations, identify factors that impose upon and limit structure in schools. While there is tight control of "ritual classifications" with regard to curricula, teacher training, accreditation of schools, and externally observed behavior of students and teachers, the trust that the community and administrators display in teachers' technical competence (a "logic of confidence") shields ("decouples") those activities from formal structural constraint. In Meyer and Rowan's view, "educational organizations lack coordination and control over the technical activity within them" (1978, p. 81). Weick (1976) refers to this situation as "loose

coupling." In this respect, the traditional view of organization is a myth (Meyer & Rowan, 1978).

Certainly this perspective draws closer to Greenfield's alternative theory of organizations, although Greenfield sees educators as possessing — or deserving — freedom far exceeding technical autonomy. He questions the assumption that *any* aspect of organizational behavior is necessarily coordinated — by formal structure or social influence — and "systematized." Greenfield emphasizes individual perception and choice, and the nonsystematized, unpredictable, uncontrollable behavior that is the expression of personal values and attitudes. Mintzberg considers that coordination "can never be so good that contingencies do not fall in the cracks between standard programs" (1979, p. 373); Greenfield stresses the cracks rather than the programs.

Finally, open systems theory accepts boundaries as organizational realities. Greenfield (1985) contends that *environment, organization, and people* are synonymous. He argues that organizational structures are generated from individual conceptions of social relationships. Organizational boundaries, then, are as illusory as the structure itself; they cannot be distinguished from the environment.

Greenfield's Contribution to a Comprehensive Theory for School Administration

Theories that facilitate generalization and prescription for organizational behavior are convenient and comfortable. The rational perspective, however, neglects the complication of the human element in its expression of universal rules, procedures, and structures. The natural systems approach attends to the informal aspect of organizations at the expense of rational behavior, and its covert, manipulative strategies are often thought to be disdainful. Open systems theory emphasizes biological processes and the social environment, but it overlooks the problem that "organizations are not written in stone, they are not part of the natural world in the same way that the molecular structure is part of the natural world" (Greenfield, cited in Macpherson, 1984, p. 3).

Although shrouded in argument that is often convoluted and emotive and in terminology that is at times unnecessarily imprecise and sensational, Greenfield's alternative theory challenges the assumptions underpinning the traditional conceptualizations of organizational life. It demands a review of the presumption that formal structures are free of individual human perceptions and choices, and calls for a new look at the formal, informal, and environmental factors that supposedly combine to form an all-encompassing definition of organization; for, in Greenfield's view, an organization can be no more than its entire membership wishes it to be. The alternative theory demands a reassessment of power, from whence it comes, and whether we have a right to assume that it will and should continue to reside with those in whom tradition and structure have vested authority. And we are prompted to question our faith both in an objective reality of coordinated, moral, acceptable — and measurable — organizational goals and behavior and in an attendant "spuriously objective" (Greenfield, 1986, p. 57) science of administration which, in its "restricted framework of rationality" (p. 63), conceives

of an organization as “an entity independent of human will, purpose, and values” (p. 62).

Such critical inquiry is valuable and healthy. However, it would be an overstatement to regard Greenfield's conception of organizations as a satisfactory substitute for existing educational administration theory. First, as Wittgenstein explains, a proposition forms a “picture . . . [or] model of reality . . . [which is] like a space bounded by solid substance in which there is room for a body” (1961, p. 39). A theory represents an interrelated network of these propositions (Silver, 1983). Wittgenstein recognizes that, although propositions may provide an “incomplete picture of a certain situation” (p. 83), they “describe the scaffolding of the world” (p. 129). While Greenfield's stance highlights the incompleteness and apparent rigidity of the rational, natural, and open systems pictures and demands a reconsideration of their underlying premises, each of these theories does contribute a partial — if value based and incomplete — scaffolding to help practitioners, theorists, and researchers to understand and work in organizational reality. Each provides a foundation for developing a comprehensive understanding of interpersonal relationships, power structures, conflict and so on. In contrast, Greenfield's explications of his alternative theory continue to offer no coherent schema for informing research or advising practising administrators. He highlights the distinctiveness, the humanness, the unpredictability of social behavior. Yet from diverse and ungeneralizable social interaction and individual perceptions and values no substantive theory of organizational behavior emerges as an alternative. Indeed this development seems to preclude the development of a theory of organization at all.

Second, although perceptions, morality, and values are individually defined, each person formulates them within a context of social interaction (Wrightsmann, 1977). In part, the individual substitutes social group norms for personal goals and values; in part, his or her interpretation of morality is shaped by those norms. As Morgan explains, while various individuals and interest groups exert conflicting influences on organization members' behavior, there arises in many organizations some “shared sense of reality” (1986, p. 133). Anthropological research, in particular, has focused attention on the ways in which organizations, as culturally determined phenomena, reflect shared systems of meaning. These are expressed in shared language, rituals, values, and beliefs as well as other common social attributes. Morgan notes that anthropology highlights the social, rather than the individual, construction of reality; and this provides a foundation for consistent values, attitudes, and actions.

As a social group structure, each school likewise possesses codes of acceptable behavior — some formally recognized, others informal, still others arising out of environmental expectations — providing a framework within which each individual develops perceptions, attitudes, and values as guides for personal action. *To this extent*, values are consistent and organizational behavior is structured, regular, observable — and often predictable. Indeed, as Scott (1981) notes, the structural arrangements that characterize organizations are akin to those that appear in

human groups in general. Greenfield's theory pays insufficient attention to those important regularities.

A third major drawback of Greenfield's theory relates to his preoccupation with individual values in research and administration. Certainly, he is justified in asserting that systems-based administration and theory are value laden; for adoption of value positions is prerequisite both to administration and to the development of theoretical frameworks of appropriate administrative objectives and action. As Holmes observes, "There cannot be good science in educational administration outside a context of recognition of the place of human values and will" (1986, p. 84). The school effectiveness literature, for example, develops proposals based on observations of behavior and investigations of attitudes in schools that operate in Western societies. Clearly, then, projections for improving schools reflect beliefs about educational intents and administrative goals and behavior which members of those societies commonly regard as worthwhile and reasonable. At the same time, as long as administrators and scholars are sufficiently honest and courageous to state those value premises, their efforts in developing and applying principles for appropriate administrative behavior can be justified. This view supports Holmes' contention that, once administrators have examined alternative value stances and their outcomes, scholars should "research the ways in which the selected choices can best be made operational" (1986, p. 87). In this regard, he sees much of the school effectiveness literature as productive, provided that it is read in the context of an understanding of effective schools as those whose primary concern is the development of character and of intellect. Interestingly, it is Greenfield's concern to avoid value positions — on the ground that values should be individually determined — that necessarily limits the coherence, specificity, and practical worth of his suggestions for developing a comprehensive alternative to existing educational administration theory.

Frameworks for viewing and understanding school organizations can and should be developed. If educational organizations are to be investigated with a view to advising educational administrators, identification of recurring behaviors and consistent relationships and the construction and application of theories cannot be avoided. Certainly, individuals perceive the world differently and, in that respect, we must accept that they construct personal realities of situations and hold differing objectives for education and the behavior of administrators. Once value positions have been decided and expressed, however, conceptualizations describing broad patterns of attitudes and interrelationships in school organizations should be established. There is no need to regard those frameworks as rigid, permanent, or universal truths about organizational behavior, or to employ them to formulate incontrovertible prescriptions for administrative action. They should be seen instead as bases for research and debate and for proposing ideas for administrative action that practitioners may find helpful, while recognizing the rights of others to hold contrary opinions, values, and objectives for education and administration.

A fourth deficiency of Greenfield's alternative view is one that applies equally to the systems views of administration. We might expect Greenfield's emphasis on individual values to lead to a consideration not only of the *is* questions of current organizational form but also the *ought* questions of administrative choice. Certainly, he challenges systems theories for failing to recognize individual nonconformity, nonrationality, resistance to authority, and self-direction. However, he neglects an important need and opportunity to question also the ethics of bureaucratic imposition and personal manipulation. Still more important, Greenfield needs to focus greater attention on and to question the morality of administrators' actions — the forces that motivate educational leaders to use the organizational strategies that they do. For example, do they coerce or entice teachers to conform to preferred ways of instructing or disciplining students out of a concern for educational advancement, or because of a wish for technical efficiency, or to avoid potential conflict with parents? As with the conventional, amoral systems theories, Greenfield's alternative view deals primarily with questions of fact — the way organizations are; so, his references to values are confusing and his "theory" offers administrators and researchers no more guidance than do existing theories about how to distinguish and account for the fact and value elements of educational administration.

Conclusion

Each of the established systems perspectives reveals important features to note in investigating and administering school organizations. As Scott asserts, "Relevant aspects of organization structure that are ignored or obscured by one perspective may be illuminated by another" (1981, p. 56). Morgan's (1986) exploration of diverse organizational images likewise highlights the contributions of differing theoretical perspectives. Nevertheless, by drawing attention to the unpredictable and individual side of organizational life, and by questioning the presumption of infallibility that is sometimes attributed to scientific investigation of social phenomena, Greenfield emphasizes that school administrators must not be constrained by general theories. We are reminded that schools comprise humans — unpredictable, willful, individual. Administrators and researchers, therefore, must accept ambiguity, competing values, and divergent goals and moral perspectives, and they must develop and employ organization theories that reflect worthwhile values and suit individual circumstances. Therein lies the challenge of educational administration and research.

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