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# Institutions and organizational change: reforming New York City's public school system

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This paper reviews New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's education reform agenda, 'Children first', in the light of organizational theory. I argue that this reform agenda reflects both coercive and mimetic isomorphism, as Bloomberg uses mayoral control to apply business concepts and practices to New York City's public school system. Through participant observation in a New York City classroom and the use of secondary data, I highlight those elements of school life that thwart the standardization so essential to the mayor's reform effort, specifically the dominant myths and fictions held by teachers.

## Introduction

> To give our children the education they deserve, New York City spends $12 billion annually and employs roughly 100,000 public servants. This has made some of our city's schools vibrant centers of learning, with dedicated and hard-working teachers and staffs. Unfortunately, these schools are the exception, and not the rule. In a majority of cases, the quality of public education we provide is woefully inadequate. And, as a result, too many of our children's futures—and our city's future—are in jeopardy. (Bloomberg, 2003)

On 15 January 2003 Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced his plan to transform the education of New York City's children by centralizing and standardizing the city's public school system. Asking constituents to judge his term as mayor on improvements made in public education, Bloomberg outlined the structural and instructional changes he believed would rid the system of the 'bureaucratic sclerosis' and 'baffling profusion' of variable teaching methods that had inhibited educational excellence in the past (Bloomberg, 2003). Bloomberg's address came seven months after he secured mayoral control of New York's schools by abolishing the city's infamous and oft-contested Board of Education (BOE).

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Consistent with the mayor's re-election, this paper reviews Bloomberg's educational reform agenda, 'Children first', in the light of organizational theory. I argue that this reform agenda reflects both coercive and mimetic isomorphism, as Bloomberg used mayoral control to apply the concepts and practices of business to education. What Bloomberg had underestimated, however, was how dominant myths and fictions held by teachers complicate the standardization vital to his reform effort.

## Theoretical background

> Today, we are ending the remaining burden of a two-tier, 'Alice in Wonderland' structure, one governing elementary and middle schools, and another separate one for the high schools—both tiers diverted from education by operational as opposed to instructional responsibilities. And both divided by more than 40 separate bureaucracies at the citywide and community school district levels, with budgets totaling millions of dollars, employing thousands of people in duplicative and unnecessary administrative jobs. … By the beginning of the next school year, these notorious bureaucratic dinosaurs will be extinct. In their place—will be one, unified, streamlined chain of command. The Chancellor and his team will organize the individual schools into this new education management structure, one dedicated to instruction, and instruction alone. (Bloomberg, 2003)

It is nearly impossible to read an article or book on education reform and avoid the word 'bureaucracy'. Considered an impediment to instructional reform and a consumer of school resources, bureaucracy is often blamed for public education's failures. As the study of organizations is also rooted in bureaucracy, I explore the relevant literature from its birth in this concept (Selznick, 1996).

In the early 1900s Frederick Winslow Taylor defined the principles of efficient management in industrial environments. His theory of scientific management stressed the division of labor between management and workers, the implementation of time and task standards for job performance and the regular evaluation of labor processes and products (Callahan, 1962). Building on Taylor's work, Max Weber utilized the term bureaucracy in 1924. For Weber bureaucracy characterized the rational method of structuring large modern organizations. Typified by hierarchy, 'impersonal rules', 'delimited spheres of duty' and an attention to 'specialized qualifications', it produced 'calculable results' and depersonalized management structures (Coser, 1977, pp. 230–231). For Weber, however, bureaucracy was more than just a system of administration; it was a social force capable of changing the nature of modern life.

Guided by this feature of Weber's work, Talcott Parsons analyzed the internal structures and external environments of organizations. According to Parsons (1956) bureaucracies run on goals 'defined and legitimated' by their social environment and, as such, they often develop internal value systems that reflect generally held social norms (p. 63). Like Parsons, Phillip Selznick (1948) also studied culture's role in organizational life. Deemed the 'father of institutionalism', Selznick believed that institutions, or established orders and patterns, impact on organizations from two directions: internally, through individual action, and externally, through environmental pressures

(p. 25). This unique pattern of impacts helps institutionalize the organization, making it a distinctive, orderly and stable entity that is 'infused with value' in society (Selznick, 1996, p. 271).

With the publication of 'Institutionalized organizations: formal structure as myth and ceremony' John Meyer and Brian Rowan (1991) spawned 'neo-institutionalism'. Focusing on the persistence of organizational forms, they revealed the symbolic value attributed to formal bureaucratic structures. According to Meyer and Rowan, while an organization's formal structure is identified by its 'offices, departments, positions, and programs … linked by explicit goals and policies', this blueprint for operations is not necessarily related to maximum organizational efficiency (pp. 41–42). Instead, in an effort to secure symbolic legitimacy, an organization's formal structure reflects the dominant myths or 'highly institutionalized' bureaucratic directives dominant in its field (p. 44).

Another neo-institutionalist concept related to the pursuit of symbolic legitimacy is 'institutional isomorphism'. Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell (1991) revealed the three isomorphic processes that encourage organizations to take similar forms: (1) coercive isomorphism occurs when organizations or cultural expectations force an organization to adopt a specific structure and is generally the result of government legislation or legal mandate; (2) mimetic isomorphism occurs when technical or environmental uncertainties encourage an organization to model other more successful organizations, which can result from unintentional processes, indirect processes (employee transfer) or direct processes (consulting or purposeful replication); (3) normative isomorphism occurs when norms of professionalism are diffused throughout organizational fields, resulting from the standardizing influences of the work culture. Despite differences in the origin or type of pressure exerted, each of these isomorphic processes reflects a desire for legitimacy and contributes to the appearance of organizational homogeneity.

While Meyer, Rowan, DiMaggio and Powell are all neo-institutionalists, they differ on the role of 'loose coupling' in organizations. Loose coupling is best understood as the weak, infrequent connection between organizational elements. For example, in an educational organization student performance is considered loosely coupled with instruction because different teaching methods can yield similar student results. According to Meyer and Rowan (1991), as bureaucratic structures become more of a reflection of organizational myths than of technical specifications, the loose coupling of formal structure and informal behaviour will be necessary for an organization to survive. In contrast, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) contended that the nature and power of institutional isomorphism will connect any and all organizational elements.

As reflected in the aforementioned example, the concept of loose coupling is particularly relevant to the study of educational organizations. Karl Weick (1976) claimed that schools are loosely coupled organizations made up of independent components that function together. For example, schools consist of departments and participants with distinct conceptions of the organization's purpose; as each department or participant has the potential to act in accord with these conceptions, it is conceivable that

a great deal of school activity is uncoordinated. Essentially, school organizations contain self-functioning subsystems held together by weak links.

For Weick the loose coupling of school structure and action is essential to successful teaching and learning: it localizes instruction in each class and with each teacher; it isolates and starves inappropriate reform efforts; it increases teacher agency and efficacy. In addition, while loose coupling may produce ambiguity in other organizations, educators make sense of the diffuse activities of their organization by creating and enacting myths to link the loosely coupled elements of schools. Examples of these myths will be explored at length in the later portion of this paper.

Such creation and enactment is central to another organizational perspective: constructionist studies. According to Knorr Cetina (1994) constructionism is a theory that 'holds reality not to be given but constructed' (p. 2). With its emphasis on the heterogeneity of local experience, constructionism runs counter to the totalizing facts (efficiency, rationality and bureaucracy) of the modern world. Instead, it implies 'the pervasiveness and relevance of fictionality' in everyday life (p. 5). Counter to Weber's prediction that bureaucracy would depersonalize human existence, Knorr Cetina believed fictions help 'enchant' or give meaning to an individual's experience in organizations and life (p. 5).

Knorr Cetina claimed that there are three fictional forms that add depth and meaning to the organizational order: (1) primitive classifications, which involve the 'symbolic (re)classification of categories in terms of metaphors and analogies from the natural and social order' (p. 9); (2) social simulations, which 'aim at something real' but are contradicted by 'voices' inside and outside the organization (p. 14); (3) fictionally operating systems of knowing, which describe the way closed systems focus on their own epistemologies. In general, these forms help 'lift modern institutions out of the purely technical' and 'install new arrangements (of) … coherent and viable frameworks' for action within an organization (p. 17).

Although both are social constructions, Weick's myths differ significantly from Knorr Cetina's fictions. Myths develop out of and in support of an organization's structure; they highlight the 'key values' and 'operating style' of the organization (Barthel, 1997, p. 402). In contrast, fictions act as components of and reactions to the 'broader processes of rationalization' that exist within an organization and the world (p. 417); they transpose a sense of the organization into an 'alternative reality', where work occurs in the light of new values/goals (p. 402). Unlike isomorphic pressures, however, both myths and fictions cater to the unique and local elements of organizational life. My analysis of 'Children first' draws on these similarities and differences, utilizing the concept of institutional isomorphism to assess the nature of the mayor's reforms, and employs the concepts of loose coupling and social constructionism to analyse barriers to their implementation.

## Methodology

This study of Mayor Bloomberg's school reforms relied on a systematic review of both primary and secondary materials on 'Children first'. For primary materials, I made

weekly visits to www.nyc.gov (the official web site of the New York City Mayor's office) and www.nycenet.edu (the official web site of the New York City Department of Education) during the spring, summer and fall months of 2003; this gave me access to press releases, speech transcripts and other materials on the reform agenda. I also attended a regional parent community engagement meeting for 'Children first' on 18 March 2003 at LaGuardia high school in Manhattan. In addition, I reviewed all materials distributed to public school parents relating to the mayor's new school plan.

For secondary materials I subscribed to *New York Times* Direct, an Internet service that delivers articles on selected topics of interest to one's e-mail address every evening. Through this subscription I was able to analyse all *New York Times* articles on the mayor's education reforms, starting from the time of his inauguration. To supplement these articles I also surveyed other local media with an interest in the mayor's changes, including *The New York Post*, *The New York Daily News*, *The Village Voice*, *The Queens Tribune*, *New York 1 Television News* and *New York City Public Television Channel 13*. Finally, I read a number of histories of public school reform in the USA and New York City, examples of which include *The one best system: a history of American urban education* by Tyack (1974), *The great school wars: a history of the New York City public schools* by Ravitch (2000) and *Tinkering toward utopia: a century of public school reform* by Tyack and Cuban (1995).

My understanding of teachers' social constructions developed out of participant observation in a summer school classroom at a public elementary school in Queens, NY. At the time of this ethnographic fieldwork (summer 2003) the New York City school system utilized a standardized summer school curriculum and was readying for the mayor's proposed reforms. This experience provided me with the context in which to frame the issue of teacher agency and to analyse stumbling blocks for the mayor's reform agenda. I supplemented insights from these observations with data from Dan Lortie's (1977) study of teachers in the USA.

It has not escaped my attention that my use of only one empirical case (i.e. Bloomberg's reform agenda for New York City's schools) may present a problem in establishing definitive theoretical gains in the area of school reform. However, in-depth analysis of a single case does permit close attention to the complexities of that specific case, which, in a study of localized resistance to universalizing organizational reforms is not only central to the task at hand, but also adds to a fuller body of research on school reorganization (Rueschemeyer, 2003).

## The business of Bloomberg: institutional isomorphism and New York's schools

> The Mayor's speech today clearly signaled that he is taking the powers of Mayoral control to the next level. The Partnership applauds Mayor Bloomberg for his plans to eliminate the bureaucratic practices and structures that make the New York school system opaque. By introducing new streamlined structures, a standardized curriculum and clear roles and responsibilities for teachers and parents at the school level, the business community believes the Mayor will make good on his pledge to improve New York City's public schools and bring greater accountability to the system. (Wylde, 2003)

In the light of DiMaggio and Powell's work on institutional isomorphism, I argue that Mayor Bloomberg's education reforms are based on institutions borrowed from his experience as founder and CEO of Bloomberg Communications. In this effort I explore how Bloomberg utilized his government mandate as head of the BOE (coercive isomorphism) to effectively model New York City public school administration after business management and school instruction after business production (mimetic isomorphism). By analyzing each component of the mayor's reform agenda separately—school governance, system accountability and curriculum reform—I highlight the nature of the institutions employed by 'Children first' in an effort to explore their sustainability.

*Reorganizing the system's bureaucratic structure: issues of school governance*

> Most elected officials, recognizing how contentious school reform is and how long it takes to show results, are happy to be insulated from education policy debates by a lay board. Not Bloomberg. To his credit, he stepped up to the plate and said, 'Give me control and hold me accountable'. … Having conquered the world of American business and high finance, and having been elected the Mayor of the City of New York on his first try at elected office, Bloomberg surely thought that fixing the schools was not a terribly difficult challenge. (Ravitch, 2003)

On 1 January 2002 Michael Bloomberg was inaugurated as Mayor of New York City. In his inaugural address he called for mayoral control of the city's school system and the dissolution of the BOE: 'The time is now. Without authority there is no accountability. The public through the Mayor must control the school system' (Bloomberg, 2002a). However, before him stood the history of New York City's public schools, a history defined by similar battles for control. Led by the mayor from 1896 to 1969, the system had been run by 32 locally elected community school boards and a borough-appointed, five-member central BOE for 33 years (Ravitch, 2000).

On 1 March 2002 Mayor Bloomberg testified before the City Council Committee on Education asking for permission to re-centralize the city's schools. Claiming the system's decentralized organization promoted 'diffused, confused and overlapping layers of authority', he petitioned for direct control of the city's school policy and leadership (New York City Mayor's Office, 2002). On 12 June of the same year he received it: New York Governor George Pataki made the mayor responsible for the education of New York City's 1.1 million students. In response, Bloomberg issued the following statement:

> Today we are making history. This reform of school governance will fundamentally change the way in which we manage the education of our children. It will give the school system the one thing it fundamentally needs, accountability. We will no longer have to tolerate an incapable bureaucracy which does not respond to the needs of the students. We are replacing it with a governance structure that will give us the opportunity to fix our broken schools, provide our children with the tools they need to succeed in society, and finally give parents the ability to voice their opinions and concerns. (New York City Department of Education, 2002b)

This appeal for mayoral control was framed in the pro-accountability, anti-bureaucracy language of the business world. Evoking Frederick Winslow Taylor's belief in the existence of 'one best method of management', the mayor defined corporate centralization against the incompetence of public administration (Callahan, 1962, p. 25).

Less than two weeks after Pataki authorized mayoral control, Bloomberg appointed a new Schools Chancellor to oversee the Department of Education. As the Chancellor works directly for the mayor in a centralized system, Bloomberg selected an individual likely to share his vision for school reform, Joel Klein, former Chairman and CEO of Bertelsmann Media. At a press conference on 29 July 2002 Bloomberg stated:

> Joel Klein embodies the exact qualities we need in a School Chancellor: integrity, dynamism, the ability to bring diverse constituencies together and an unwavering commitment to results. … His unique background will allow him to take a fresh look at the problems plaguing the school system which have been thought of as intractable. (New York City Department of Education, 2002a)

These comments, in addition to the nature of Klein's experience, offer additional insight into Bloomberg's conception of effective school management. For Bloomberg the system required the leadership of someone from outside the world of education, someone with a fresh perspective, business management expertise and a dedication to technical efficiency.

Klein was also made Chief Executive of the DOE's new Panel for Education Policy, a 13-member central body replacing the former BOE. The Panel consisted of seven additional mayorally appointed members and five public school parents appointed by the city's borough presidents. Instead of participating in day-to-day school affairs like its predecessor, the new Panel only reviews school policy immediately prior to its implementation (Gewertz, 2002).

The dissolution of the BOE foreshadowed the end of the 32 community school boards responsible for the budgets, contracts, materials and leadership of city schools. In July 2004 these boards were replaced by community district education councils, each consisting of nine parents elected by local parents' associations, two community members appointed by borough presidents and one student plucked from the ranks of local student government (Yan, 2003). By changing the nature and power of the central and community boards the mayor has effectively reduced all threats to his vision of control.

Further indication that centralization reflects business institutions can be found in the support extended to it by New York's business community. In 2001 a group of industry executives appealed to Albany for mayoral control of the city's educational system. Their rationale was simple: a centralized system was necessary to 'produce graduates who can thrive in a competitive economy' (Editorial, 2002). Similarly, in an opinion editorial piece the editors of *Crain's New York Business* (Editorial, 2000) called for 'all business groups, from local chambers of commerce to industry associations' to support the mayor's efforts to centralize the system and 'make someone responsible for what happens in the schools'.

Centralizing control of the public school system gave Mayor Bloomberg the mandate (coercive isomorphism) he needed to appoint the Schools Chancellor, destroy the BOE and rid the city of its community school boards. Described as necessary for 'systematic change in our schools', mayoral control allowed Bloomberg to restructure school administration according to the orders and patterns he knows best, business institutions (Bloomberg, 2002b).

*Reorganizing the system's bureaucratic structure: establishing accountability*

> The Mayor is at heart a businessman. He's running the city and the schools much like his old corporation, even moving out of his private office at City Hall into an open bullpen like the one he used at Bloomberg News. He's ordered Klein and his people to work the same way, and to adopt his business battle cry: No frills. Be efficient and eliminate duplication. (Stahl, 2003)

According to Mayor Bloomberg, dissolving the BOE and the community school boards provided the 'blank slate' necessary to '(clear) out the Byzantine administrative fiefdoms' that had developed under the old system. By reorganizing the governance structure he was able to institute a 'streamlined accountability chain' designed to transform the management of all city schools (Bloomberg, 2003). This accountability chain has redefined the role of superintendents, district employees and principals within the city school system.

Once appointed by the community school boards and responsible for a variety of administrative matters in their district, New York City's superintendents now have a new title, new responsibilities and a new boss. Under 'Children first' the city's schools are now divided into 10 instructional regions, each led by a Regional Superintendent. The Regional Superintendent supports instruction in approximately five districts, or 177 schools, and reports directly to Deputy Schools Chancellor Carmen Farina (or Deputy Schools Chancellor Andres Alonso, Fall 2006). Assuming the former administrative responsibilities of superintendents are six Regional Support Centers. Under DOE directive, these centers oversee the regions' budgets and personnel concerns.

From DOE headquarters each Regional Superintendent is responsible for 10 of 113 Local Instructional Supervisors (LIS). Unlike their district office predecessors, the LIS support and assess principals from one of 10 new regional offices or Learning Support Centers. Due to a lawsuit filed by New York State Senator Carl Kruger contesting the elimination of district offices, 32 of the LIS also serve as community superintendents in each district.

At school sites principals control their own budgets for the first time in decades. They also exercise greater autonomy in local decision-making. In return, the LIS hold them directly accountable for the academic performance and family-friendly nature of their schools. To prepare for these responsibilities the city's principals spent the summer of 2003 in the DOE's Leadership Academy, a privately financed institute led by the former Chairman of Triangle II Partners, Robert Knowling (Levine, 2003).

Reminiscent of the industrial language he used to frame the benefits of centralization, Mayor Bloomberg's creation of a 'streamlined accountability chain' also reflects

business institutions. With its efforts to distinguish administrative and instructional labor, these structural reforms recall Taylor's writings on the management of efficient production. For example, believing administrators are as much to blame for problems in education as are teachers, Bloomberg charged principals with improving school 'plants'. Referring to them as 'line managers', he made them responsible for turning around the 'output' of their schools (Steinhauer, 2003). Like Taylor, Bloomberg believes in a single science of effective management. Consequently, he modeled the principals' Leadership Academy after General Electric's training facility, appointed General Electric CEO Jack Welch and AOL Time Warner CEO Richard Parsons to the Academy's advisory panel and incorporated 'teamwork exercises', 'best practices seminars', and 'case study analyses' into the Academy's professional development efforts (France, 2003).

Similar business customs can be seen throughout Bloomberg's new 'streamlined' structure. In the name of cost reduction he merged school construction divisions, consolidated book and material purchasing, eliminated teacher sabbaticals and converted school offices into classrooms. In an effort to standardize management he gave administrators consistent titles and organized them into the cubicle pods also found in Bloomberg Communications. On behalf of customer service he created parent support offices that are open to queries six days a week, permitted early student registration and staffed schools with parent coordinators.

With consultants from McKinsey & Co., Bloomberg also legally reorganized New York's school districts into 10 instructional divisions. While this reorganization does not change school zoning or the nature of neighborhood schools, it was meant to 'eliminate unnecessary bureaucracy', 'provide more efficient delivery of services' and 'maximize available resources' throughout the DOE (Klein, 2003).

Through centralized control (coercive isomorphism) Bloomberg was able to model (mimetic isomorphism) school administration after rationalized systems of business management. In addition to invoking the institutions of accountability and efficiency across the system, 'Children First' also created the channels necessary for reforming the school curriculum in accord with business production patterns.

### *Reforming schools' heterogeneous curricula: standards and assessment*

> Klein inherited a hodge-podge system so decentralized that in parts of the city, individual schools have designed their own curricula. In one school, you might find a rigid, count-them-out approach to math. While down the street, they're teaching what critics call 'fuzzy math.' … (Through the reorganization) they're 'unifying the product line'—business-speak for replacing those scores of different teaching methods with one citywide curriculum for math and reading. (Stahl, 2003)

For Mayor Bloomberg the reorganization of New York's school system had two goals: eliminating bureaucracy and improving teaching and learning. In his January 2003 education address he outlined his plan to improve instruction: '[The] reformed management structure will be the engine for achieving educational excellence in all 1,200 schools. A new, coherent, system-wide curriculum for teaching reading, writing

and math will be the fuel that drives this engine' (Bloomberg, 2003). With its emphasis on uniformity and assessment, this instructional reform also reflected business institutions.

Upon returning to school in the fall of 2003, New York's teachers adopted standardized math and reading curricula. They were given fully defined lesson plans aligned with a system-wide instructional schedule and told to ready their students for six new city-wide achievement tests. The exact details of these instructional reforms follow.

Prior to the mayor's reorganization there were over 50 different math programs in use across the city. Under 'Children first' all elementary schools (K–5) follow the 'Everyday Math' curriculum, all middle schools (6–8) use 'Impact Mathematics' and all high schools teach 'New York Math A'. Kindergarten through second graders receive 60 minutes of math instruction a day and third through eighth graders are taught math for 75 minutes a day. These daily math blocks consist of teaching time, practice examinations, independent work and game playing. In addition to city-wide and state-wide math tests administered annually, third through eighth graders are also evaluated by The Princeton Review three times a year.

During the 2002–2003 academic year New York City's schools utilized over 30 distinct reading programs. Under 'Children first' all elementary and middle school teachers now employ a 'balanced literacy approach' for 90 minutes a day. This instruction consists of: 'literacy blocks' focused on reading and writing skills, 'shared reading' between the teacher and the class, 'guided reading' within small student groups, 'writer's workshops' focused on self-directed writing and 'independent student reading' in new classroom libraries. In addition, kindergarten through third grade students gather for 20–45 minutes of 'Month by Month Phonics' every day, fourth through eighth graders read for an extra 90 minutes a day and struggling high school students spend two supplemental periods a week on reading and writing. The Princeton Review also evaluates third through eighth grade students in reading three times a year and the annual city-wide and state-wide reading exams continue as well (*Children first—frequently asked questions*; New York City Department of Education, 2003a).

According to Chancellor Klein 'different books, different workbooks, [and] different professional development' provided no 'coherence' to the city's previous system of instruction (Stahl, 2003). In contrast, the new uniform approach was said to make teaching more 'comprehensive' and 'consistent', the education of students and training of teachers more 'efficient' and the experience of mobile students and employees more 'continuous' (Klein, 2003). Likewise, the city's emphasis on assessment is said to alert teachers, principals and LISs to problems in student achievement early enough in the school year for effective intervention.

The act of standardizing instruction and instituting regular evaluations borrows directly from the management principles of Frederick Winslow Taylor. For Taylor standardization objectively defined the best method and time-frame to efficiently achieve one's technical goals. Likewise, efficiency also required the regular assessment of both process and product to ensure that work was completed in accordance

with system standards (Callahan, 1962). Reminiscent of the industrial tenets of scientific management, standardized curricula and increased assessment further indicate the effects of institutional isomorphism, in general, and mimetic isomorphism, in particular, on 'Children first'.

## Obstacles to implementation: the power of myths and fictions in school environments

> Virtually every discussion of education reform in the United States today takes for granted the notion that kids need 'higher standards' in school. It is a simple and an enormously popular idea: let's decide what everyone ought to know, and then let's test every kid to make sure they all know it. The ones who don't won't be promoted or get a diploma. But is this really what our kids need? I believe that the current push for national and state-mandated standards is fundamentally misguided. It leads inevitably to standardization, which is the antithesis of real education. (Meier, 2000)

Brian Rowan (1982) analyzed the 'diffusion and stabilization' of education reforms. Claiming that successful implementation required 'a state of balance in the institutional environment', he considered consensus-building central to innovation in schools (p. 259). According to Rowan the development and implementation of new administrative channels in public education generally requires one central actor—for New York City's school system this actor is the city government. Consequently, the reorganization of a school system's governance and administrative structure does not require institutional consensus. In contrast, however, curriculum reform does require institutional consensus, particularly at the school level, where local resistance can restrict or transform implementation. I argue that Bloomberg's efforts to implement unified, assessment-based curricula necessitate the support of a body of actors likely to resist his agenda – teachers. By considering the myths and fictions that animate teaching, I identify the features of school life that complicate Mayor Bloomberg's curriculum reform.

### *The ties that bind: 'Children first' and the myth of individualism*

> It wasn't working. We'd gone though six straight wrong answers, and now the kids were tired of feeling lost. It was only October, and already my fourth grade public school class in the South Bronx was demoralized. … Then, quietly, 10-year-old David spoke up. 'Mr. Clavel, no one understands this stuff.' He looked up at me with a defeated expression; other children nodded pleadingly. … 'Look,' I began, sighing deeply. 'Math isn't half as hard as you all probably think right now.' … 'There are different ways to teach it,' I continued. 'I don't want to do this either so we're not going to—at least most of the time.' If school officials knew how my math lessons would deviate from the school district-mandated math program in the months ahead, they probably would have fired me on the spot. (Clavel, 2003)

As explored by Karl Weick, loosely coupled organizations like schools require myths to connect their diverse activities and give meaning to their formal structure. Although the emphasis of 'Children first' on accountability, standards and assessment makes

New York's school system considerably less 'loose' than its formal self, Bloomberg's curriculum reforms must contend with the myths that developed with and in defense of the old system. In my estimation teaching's myth of individualism affects the implementation of uniform methods and materials.

According to Dan Lortie (1977) teachers view schools as aggregate, rather than systematic, organizations. Despite the shared impact of school-wide policies, salary scales, staff development efforts and union membership, teachers perceive and value themselves as individual members of the school community. This individualism most likely stems from the loose coupling of elements that impact on them daily: from methods and results to theory and practice, a teacher's day rarely consists of activities perceived as interrelated or allied with a unified system of school management. By defining their experiences as individual in nature, teachers make sense of the variable aspects of daily school life and establish personal guidelines for behavior.

This myth of individualism developed through the professionalization of teaching. Teacher education programs are historically focused on subject matter knowledge and student learning. Recognizing that diverse teaching methods can yield similar results, these programs rarely provide concrete strategies for instruction. As a result, teachers actually learn to teach in the classroom, which prevents the development of a binding 'technical subculture' (p. 70).

Similarly, the myth of individualism was born alongside the cellular organization of modern school design. Schoolteachers spend the majority of their day within the confines of individual classrooms. Kept separate from colleagues, they 'discern problems, consider alternative solutions, make (selections), and … assess (outcomes)' independently (Lortie, 1977, p. 72). This discourages seeking advice and diminishes the potential development of a teacher community or shared work culture.

The myth of individualism is also intrinsic to the loose nature of school structures. Despite the presence of an administrative hierarchy, school leadership is 'diffuse rather than concentrated' (Weick, 1982, p. 675). Teachers are the rightful leaders of their classrooms; they must manage students, their parents, class materials and class work space immediately, often without guidance from their peers or administrators. As a consequence, teachers also supervise themselves. In fact, Lortie's survey of 5000 Florida schoolteachers revealed that most teachers value their own assessments of teaching and learning over the results of student examinations or formal administrative observations.

Finally, the myth of individualism is inherent in the popular conceptualization of teaching as an 'art'. With its lack of formal methods and scientific prescriptions 'teaching must be recognized as a process that calls for intuition, creativity, improvisation and expressiveness' (Gage, 1978, p. 15). As a result, new theories and techniques are tailored to teachers' 'personal styles and preferences' and evaluated by each teacher according to 'what works' in his or her classroom (Lortie, 1977, p. 78). For this reason, even uniform teaching methods are individualized at the local level.

The myth of individualism in teaching is a 'highly valued organizational practice' that is enacted daily; it is also a 'widely accepted pattern of organization' that has been

institutionalized throughout the teaching experience (Jaffee, 1998, p. 26). As such, it presents a unique and concrete barrier to school reform: teachers decide independently whether, how and to what extent their classrooms will change. Interestingly, 'Children first' contradicts the myth of individualism in both form and content: it aims to standardize teaching with prescribed methods and materials while standardizing learning through uniform curricula and assessment technologies.

*Enchanting bureaucracy: the service fiction*

> Let's face it. There are many reasons not to become a teacher—and they are substantial. … Fortunately for the 80 million American children whose education rests in teachers' hands, some of our nation's brightest, most ambitious, and dedicated individuals continue to enter the field. Bolstered by a sturdy mission and lofty goals, these teachers step directly into their profession's challenges day after day. Although their work often goes unnoticed by a society that absolutely depends on them, they return to the classroom simply because they draw deep satisfaction from helping young people learn. (Buchinder, 2003, p. 6)

Unlike Weber, Knorr Cetina studied the enchanting elements of bureaucratic organization. Focusing on the construction of fictions, she revealed the 'definitional frames' employees enact to counter bureaucratic discourse and animate organizational life (Knorr Cetina, 1994, p. 7). While these fictions also give meaning to local experience, they differ from myths in their emphasis on the alternative realities within organizations. Employing Knorr Cetina's work on fictions as social simulations, I uncovered the service fiction created and performed by teachers to offset the rational organization of schools. Consistent with my observations, this fiction poses a problem for system-wide standardization and assessment.

According to Lortie (1977) teachers believe that they 'perform a special mission in society' (p. 28). As human service professionals they focus more on their relationships with students than they do on the structure of their schools. This focus is evident in the primacy of psychic rewards, rather than extrinsic rewards, in their self and career assessments. Teachers want to feel that they have 'reached' their students; they place high value on securing student affection and respect, eliciting student effort and individual improvement, and instilling a love for learning (p. 118). As a consequence, teachers' concept of a 'job well done' may differ from the formal goals or benchmarks of their school.

This emphasis on psychic rewards also makes teachers more present-oriented than other professionals. Teachers focus their energy on those aspects of a child or lesson that they are most likely to affect. As a result, they tailor their activities to the needs of the instructional moment, rather than the dictates of their instructional schedule. In addition, the erratic nature of psychic rewards also discourages teachers from sacrificing moments of connection in the present for potentially similar moments in the future. Out of a desire to bond with students and impart understanding, most teachers prefer satisfying immediate learning opportunities to 'staying on task' with organizational objectives.

Similarly, the service fiction also encourages teachers to devote significant classroom time to 'moral' learning. In an effort to infuse their tasks with the 'ethos' of their mission, teachers will often utilize openings in their curriculum or classroom to address students' more social needs. In diverse urban classrooms the desire to impart lessons of civility, cooperative living and respect for difference is even more pronounced. As a result, city teachers tend to divide their attention between formal instructional goals and informal student socialization even more than other teachers do.

The service fiction also invites teachers' own values into the classroom. Deeply committed to 'getting students to love reading', 'encouraging independent thought' or whatever their personal goal, teachers exercise a certain amount of 'value pluralism' in their work (Lortie, 1977, p. 115). These values help shape teachers' instructional emphases and methods. Consequently, even standardized lessons can differ from teacher to teacher.

Lastly, the moral components of teaching's service fiction present a problem for assessment. As teaching is marked by a 'breadth of purpose', teachers have multiple criteria for measuring student achievement (Lortie, 1977, p. 136). While standardizing assessments may appear to threaten this practice, multiple assessment criteria are even considered in New York's test-based, promotion-focused summer school program.

The service fiction helps teachers enchant their experiences within school bureaucracies; it serves as the teachers' response to the policies and rulings that regulate their interactions with students and control their classrooms. While this fiction does not alter the nature of school structures, it does provide 'a set of motivating ideas and models for action' within the classroom (Barthel, 1997, p. 417). Consequently, it encourages teachers to value and perform their work in ways that contradict the uniform, test-based and exclusively cognitive nature of 'Children first'.

## Discussion

> The most striking thing about the sweeping federal educational reforms debuting this fall is how much they resemble, in language and philosophy, the industrial-efficiency movement of the early twentieth century. (Gladwell, 2003, p. 31)

On 8 January 2002 President George Bush instituted historic education legislation tying public school performance to the receipt of federal Title I funding. Central to his No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is a single 'test-based accountability system' for all states, where schools that perform according to state standards receive federal funding and schools that do not face a range of sanctions (student transfers, organizational restructuring or school closure) in exchange for continued funding (Elmore, 2002, p. 35).

With its emphasis on standardizing delivery and assessment in education at the federal level, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) indicates the pervasive nature of industrial efficiency models in modern school reform. Given the current decline in fiscal and political support for public education, student test scores have emerged as the one uniform, quantitative measure politicians can use to judge school efficiency.

Likewise, school performance sanctions have come to exemplify the accountability possible in large government bureaucracies.

Critics of broad-based efforts to dismantle school bureaucracies and standardize student learning argue that such agendas ignore 'the real world found inside schools' (Sizer, 1992, p. 11). For example, Darling-Hammond (2004) described how NCLB does little to acknowledge or combat the 'dreadful school conditions' that result from persistent, systemic inequality in the provision of education in the USA (p. 8). Likewise, Meier (2002) demonstrated how the most vulnerable students (i.e. students of color, special education students, etc.) become casualties of standards-based initiatives. And Hargreaves (2003) outlined how market-based ideologies rob teachers of the creativity and spontaneity that define good instruction. Of significance, my critique takes a different perspective. Building on studies of local activism against school standardization (see, for example, Goodson & Foote, 2001), I focus on teacher agency in the face of such efforts.

According to Richard Elmore (2002), Professor of Education Policy at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, 'a school's ability to make improvements has to do with the beliefs and practices that people in the organization share, not with the kind of information they receive about their performance' (p. 37). Like Bloomberg's 'Children first' initiative, NCLB does not account for the influence of school and teacher culture in the function (or dysfunction) of school reform. Without changing central components of the teaching experience, and thereby altering the norms, values and expectations teachers construct, true reform of any nature is unlikely.

## Conclusion

> Schools never achieved the organizational controls or technological breakthroughs in instruction that would have paralleled mass production increases in industry. The heart of the school—the classroom—proved more resistant to change than did the factory floor. Study after study has shown that the 'core technology' of classroom instruction has remained relatively stable, despite periodic cults of efficiency and new reigning philosophies. (Tyack & Hansot, 1982, p. 158)

New York City's public school class of 2002 reflected the dismal reality of education in the five boroughs at the time of Bloomberg's entrée into public service: only 50% of the class met graduation requirements, while 20% had entirely dropped out of school (New York City Department of Education, 2003c). Similarly, during the spring of 2002, only 40% of primary school students met state standards for reading and only 35% met state standards for math (New York City Department of Education, 2003b). Arguably, the schools are failing the majority of New York's children.

Claiming that the city has 'found excuses to delay the education of kids for decades', Mayor Bloomberg tackled the Department of Education like a CEO focused on corporate turnaround (Steinhauer, 2003). Armed with the business institutions that had brought him success in the past, he reorganized the governance and management structure of the city's schools and changed its approach to instruction.

I argue, however, that the instructional reforms of 'Children first' require a sense of institutional balance not necessary in many types of administrative change. Focusing on teachers as 'wholes' with 'a propensity to resist depersonalization', I have identified two social constructions of teaching: the myth of individualism and the service fiction (Selznick, 1948, p. 26). I have also explored what these constructions mean for the implementation of standardized, assessment-based curricula at the local level.

Future research should explore how efforts to standardize education have influenced the way teachers conceptualize, value and conduct their work in the new system. Studies of site-based efforts to reform school culture and their effects on teachers' constructions should also be conducted. Finally, given the centrality of standards and the increased importance of assessment in educational reform across the nation, scholarship on the emergence of new myths and fictions in teaching should also prove beneficial.

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