



Institutional Mechanisms Of School Management In Improving Student Attendance

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the institutional mechanisms available to school management for the improvement of student attendance. The author proceeds from the thesis that attendance is among the most intensively monitored and least effectively managed indicators of school performance, and that this conjunction is not accidental but follows from the organisational properties of the school as an institution. Two classes of mechanism are distinguished: those operating through the formal administrative structure — registers, reporting, notification and sanction — and those penetrating to the technical core of the school, that is, to the relations between teachers and students within which attendance is actually determined. Employing the comparative-analytical, structural-functional and systemic methods, the study applies to the problem K. Weick's conception of educational organisations as loosely coupled systems, the analysis of formal structure as myth and ceremony advanced by J. Meyer and B. Rowan, the theory of institutional isomorphism of P. DiMaggio and W. Powell, the participation-identification model of J. Finn and the social bonding theory of T. Hirschi. It is demonstrated that mechanisms of the first class reliably produce documentation without producing attendance, and seven conditions under which management intervention reaches the technical core are established.

KEYWORDS: student attendance, school management, institutional mechanisms, loose coupling, decoupling, institutional isomorphism, participation-identification, social bonding, early warning indicators, named adult, family-school partnership, performance indicators.

INTRODUCTION

Attendance occupies a singular position among the indicators by which schools are governed. It is recorded daily for every student, aggregated weekly, reported upward monthly and examined by supervisory bodies at every level of the educational administration; no other dimension of school functioning is measured with comparable frequency or completeness. It is also, by the common testimony of those who administer schools, among the dimensions least responsive to administrative effort. A school may possess an impeccable system of registration, a complete archive of notifications issued to families and a full record of sanctions applied, and may nevertheless exhibit no improvement whatever in the quantity of instruction its students actually receive. The coexistence of intensive measurement with persistent ineffectiveness is the problem from which the present article proceeds. The explanation ordinarily offered attributes the failure to insufficient rigour: the registers are not kept accurately enough, the notifications are not issued promptly enough, the sanctions are not applied consistently enough. Upon this account the remedy is the intensification of what is already being done. The account is unsatisfactory for a reason that is empirical rather than theoretical: schools in which

registration, notification and sanction are administered with exemplary rigour do not reliably outperform those in which they are not, and the variation in attendance between schools serving comparable populations does not track the rigour of their administrative procedures. A mechanism whose intensification does not produce the outcome it is directed at is not an insufficiently applied remedy but a misidentified one. The alternative premise upon which this study rests is that attendance is not a behaviour to be compelled but an indicator of a relation. J. Finn formulated the position in the participation–identification model, according to which the withdrawal of a student from school is a cumulative process extending over years: participation in classroom activity declines first, then participation in the wider life of the school, then the identification of the student with the institution as a place to which he belongs, and only at the end of this sequence does physical absence appear [5, p. 117–142]. Absence is therefore the terminal symptom of a process whose earlier stages were visible and unremarked, and a management system that acts only upon the symptom acts after the point at which action was possible. The mechanism underlying the process was described by T. Hirschi in the theory of social bonding, which holds that conformity is sustained not by the fear of sanction but by the strength of the individual's bond to the conventional order — by attachment to persons within it, commitment to the investment he has made in it, involvement in its activities and belief in its legitimacy — and that the weakening of any component of that bond frees him from its claims [6, p. 16–34]. Applied to the school, this yields a proposition of direct managerial significance: a student who is attached to a teacher, who has invested in an outcome the school provides and who is involved in its activity does not require compulsion to attend, while a student in whom these conditions are absent cannot be compelled to attend for long. The question therefore becomes why school management, possessing this knowledge, continues to employ mechanisms directed at the symptom. The answer lies in the organisational structure of the school itself. K. Weick demonstrated that educational organisations are loosely coupled systems, in which the administrative apparatus and the technical core of instruction are connected weakly, with few variables in common and slow, infrequent and weak response between them; what is decided in the office does not propagate reliably into the classroom, and what occurs in the classroom is only partially visible from the office [10, p. 1–19]. A directive concerning attendance accordingly alters the behaviour of the administration far more reliably than it alters the conditions under which attendance is determined. J. Meyer and B. Rowan supplied the complementary analysis. Formal structures in organisations such as schools, they argued, function in substantial part as myth and ceremony: they are adopted because they confer legitimacy upon the organisation in the eyes of its environment rather than because they coordinate activity, and the organisation protects itself from the inefficiency this would otherwise produce by decoupling the formal structure from the activity it nominally governs, maintaining the appearance of conformity through a logic of confidence and avoiding close inspection [7, p. 340–363]. The attendance procedure is a paradigmatic instance: it is elaborate, documented, reported, and connected to classroom practice only at the point at which a number is entered. That schools adopt procedures so similar to one another, irrespective of their circumstances or of any evidence of effect, is explained by P. DiMaggio and W. Powell through the mechanisms of institutional isomorphism — coercive pressure exerted by the bodies upon which the organisation depends, mimetic imitation of other organisations under conditions of uncertainty, and normative pressure transmitted through professional training [2, p. 147–160].

The convergence is therefore not evidence that the common procedure works; it is evidence that the pressures producing it are common. S. Sheldon and J. Epstein, by contrast, demonstrated that improvements in attendance are associated with specific practices of systematic family and community involvement rather than with the intensity of administrative enforcement [9, p. 39–56], and U. Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework explains why: the student participates simultaneously in several settings, and the links between them constitute a determinant distinct from the properties of any one [1, p. 3–42]. In the conditions of Uzbekistan these questions are connected with the modernisation of educational governance and with the renewal of the models of professional preparation of teachers [8, p. 325–328], as well as with the formation of the worldview within which young people assess their own obligation to study, which proceeds through the system of continuous education [3, p. 314–316; 4, p. 10–13]. The aim of the present article consists in establishing which institutional mechanisms available to school management are capable of improving attendance and under what conditions. The novelty of the work lies in the classification of these mechanisms by their capacity to penetrate the loose coupling between the administration and the technical core, and in the demonstration that the prevailing procedures fail by a structural mechanism rather than through insufficient application.

The study relies upon the structural-functional approach, applied in order to distinguish the declared functions of attendance procedures from the latent functions they perform within the organisation that maintains them. The comparative-analytical method has been used to correlate conceptions formed within organisational sociology, the institutional theory of organisations and educational research on student withdrawal, and to establish the point at which their explanatory schemes converge. The systemic approach has made it possible to represent the school as an organisation composed of an administrative apparatus and a technical core connected loosely, and to assess each mechanism by its capacity to traverse that connection. Logical-methodological analysis has served to test the prevailing explanation of administrative failure against the evidence it is unable to accommodate. The material of the investigation comprises the classical works on loose coupling, institutionalised organisation and isomorphism, together with the research literature on student withdrawal, social bonding and family involvement.

The first result establishes the classification upon which the analysis rests. The institutional mechanisms available to school management divide into two classes according to where their effects terminate. Structural-administrative mechanisms — the register, the periodic report, the notification to the family, the formal warning, the referral to an external body — operate entirely within the administrative apparatus: each is performed by an administrator, documented by an administrator and verified by an administrator, and the sequence may be executed in full without any alteration in the conduct of a single lesson. Core-penetrating mechanisms — the assignment of a named adult to a particular student, the use of attendance data as professional information within a teaching team, the modification of curricular arrangements for those at risk of withdrawal — terminate in the classroom. The first class is preferred because it is inspectable, attributable and cheap; the second is effective. The second result identifies the specific mode by which the first class fails, which is decoupling rather than negligence. The diagnostic signs of a decoupled attendance system are identifiable and may be used as an instrument of institutional self-assessment. Data are collected with precision and



are not consulted by anyone who teaches the students they describe. The procedure is known in detail to those who administer it and only in outline to those whose practice it is supposed to govern. The output of each step in the sequence is a further document rather than a change in anyone's conduct towards a particular child. And the procedure is defended, when questioned, by reference to its completeness rather than to its results. A system exhibiting these signs is not failing to operate; it is operating exactly as a ceremonial structure operates. The third result concerns the attribution of responsibility, which is the first condition of penetration. In the ordinary arrangement responsibility for attendance is distributed across the class teacher, the deputy for upbringing, the social pedagogue and the administration, with the consequence that each possesses a portion of the information and none possesses an obligation towards a particular child. The mechanism that overcomes this is the assignment of a named adult: for every student at risk of withdrawal, one identified person who holds the relation, knows the circumstances and is accountable for the contact. Its efficacy derives from its structure rather than from the qualities of the person — it converts a diffuse organisational obligation into a specific personal one, and in doing so it bypasses the hierarchy through which directives are attenuated. The fourth result concerns the conversion of the register from a record into information, which is the second condition. A daily register answers the question whether a student was present today; the question that matters institutionally is what proportion of instruction a student has received over a period, and the two are not related in any way that an administrator can perceive without deliberate aggregation. A student absent one day in seven is never conspicuous on any single day, is rarely the subject of any notification, and will nevertheless have lost the equivalent of a full school year across the course of compulsory education. The mechanism required is the cumulative threshold: the systematic identification of students whose aggregate attendance has crossed a defined level, irrespective of whether any individual absence was justified. This single analytical operation renders visible a population that the daily register conceals by construction. The fifth result concerns the limits of the sanction, which is the mechanism most readily available to management and the one whose domain of validity is narrowest. A sanction alters conduct by raising the cost of an alternative, and it is therefore effective in the case in which absence is a choice made under conditions the student or family controls. Where absence is produced by circumstances they do not control — an obligation at home, a barrier of distance or cost, a condition for which documentation was not obtained, an aversion generated within the school itself — the sanction adds a cost without removing the cause, and in several of these cases it accelerates the withdrawal it was intended to arrest. The use of exclusion from instruction as a response to absence from instruction is the clearest instance of a remedy that intensifies the condition it treats. The sixth result concerns the coupling between the school and the family, which the ecological analysis identifies as a determinant distinct from the properties of either. The decisive distinction here is between notification and contact. A notification transmits information from the institution to a household and terminates upon its transmission; contact establishes a relation within which information travels in both directions, so that the school learns what is producing the absence. Attendance improves where schools establish systematic contact of the second kind, and the practices through which this is accomplished — scheduled communication initiated by the school rather than prompted by a threshold, the involvement of community structures, the provision of a route by which a family may report a difficulty

before it becomes an absence — are organisational arrangements rather than exhortations, and are therefore within the competence of management. The seventh result concerns a risk inherent in the managerial framing itself and must be stated if the analysis is to be useful. Where attendance functions as a performance indicator by which schools and their directors are assessed, the incentive created is not an incentive to improve attendance but an incentive to improve the recorded figure, and the two may be satisfied by entirely different actions. The reclassification of unexcused absence as excused, the retrospective acceptance of justifications, the informal discouragement of registration for students known to be absent, and the exclusion from the roll of those whose attendance would depress the average are all available, all cheaper than the measures described above, and all consistent with an impeccable record. The institutional safeguard is the separation of the data used for professional purposes within the school from the data reported upward for accountability, since an indicator that governs the fate of those who produce it cannot simultaneously serve as a reliable instrument of diagnosis.

Conclusion

The analysis undertaken permits the following conclusions. First, the coexistence of intensive measurement of attendance with persistent ineffectiveness in improving it is not evidence of insufficient administrative rigour but a consequence of the organisational structure of the school. The prevailing explanation, which prescribes the intensification of existing procedures, is refuted by the absence of any reliable association between the rigour with which those procedures are administered and the attendance actually achieved. Second, attendance is the terminal symptom of a cumulative process of withdrawal whose earlier stages — declining participation in classroom activity, declining involvement in the life of the school, the loss of identification with it — precede physical absence by a considerable period and are visible throughout. A management system that acts only when absence appears acts after the stage at which intervention was inexpensive and effective. Third, the institutional mechanisms available to management divide by where their effects terminate. Structural-administrative mechanisms operate wholly within the administrative apparatus and may be executed in full without altering the conduct of a single lesson; their reliable output is documentation. Core-penetrating mechanisms terminate in the classroom, and the conditions of penetration are the assignment of a named adult accountable for a particular child, the aggregation of the register into cumulative information, and the establishment of contact rather than notification with families. Fourth, the sanction possesses a narrow domain of validity. It is effective where absence is a choice made under conditions the family controls, and it is counterproductive where absence is produced by circumstances they do not, since it then adds a cost without removing a cause. The use of exclusion from instruction as a response to absence from instruction is the clearest case of a remedy that intensifies the condition it treats. Fifth, the use of attendance as a performance indicator by which schools are assessed creates an incentive to improve the recorded figure rather than the attendance, and the available means of doing so are cheaper than the measures that would improve it in fact. The institutional safeguard is the separation of professional data used within the school from accountability data reported upward. The prospect of further research consists in the development of diagnostic instruments for detecting decoupling in attendance systems and in the experimental



verification of the named-adult mechanism in the conditions of general secondary education in Uzbekistan.

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