Occupational and Organizational Socialization into the Urban School Principal’s Office: New School Principals’ Evolving Frames for Students

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The role of schools in the social reproduction of race and social class stratification from one generation to the next is an enduring issue in sociological and educational research. Scholars have explored how structural forces, school-level institutional practices, and students’ responses to these structures and practices enable social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Fordham, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; MacLeod, 1996; Ogbu, 1978; Rist, 1970; Roscigno, 1997; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Willis, 1977). The interplay between these factors contributes to laminating the disadvantages for students from less affluent families and certain students of color. A prominent explanation for these patterns in the literature focuses on teachers’ academic expectations for their students (Farkas, 1996; Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan, & Shaun, 1990; Ferguson, 1998; Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996; Rist, 1970; Roscigno, 1997; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). This work suggests that teachers’ perceptions of low-income and African American students’ academic ability are lower than those they hold for middle- and upper-income white students. A core theme in this literature has been the “self-fulfilling prophecy” through which teachers’ low expectations reduce students’ academic self-image, cause students to exert less effort in school, and lead teachers to give certain students less challenging work (Farkas, 1996; Farkas, et al., 1990; Rist, 1970). Though informative, a problem with this scholarship is the inattention to teachers’ assessments of students in organizational contexts, emphasizing instead interactions between individual teachers and their students. Still, scholarship suggests there is an organizational dimension to this phenomenon as teachers’ sense of responsibility for student learning is connected with their beliefs about students’ academic abilities through a set of organizationally embedded expectations regarding what is possible for students from particular backgrounds—“organizational habitus” (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Lee & Smith, 2000; McDonough, 1997). In the U.S., school principals play a central role in transforming (or failing to do so) the culture of their school organization. Still, the literature is sparse on how school principals’ frame their students and how these frames evolve (or not) during their first few years on the job.

This presentation, based on an ongoing study of new principals’ on-the-job socialization, examines how two cohorts of new urban school principals’ frame their elementary school students and how these frames evolve (or not) as they figure out their identities as school principals during their first year on the job. Taking a sense-making perspective to occupational and organizational socialization, we focus on the perspectives and expectations of those who have just made the “boundary passage” into the principalship (Schein, 1971) and who are therefore pressed to make sense of a new occupation and organization—in other words, both what it means to be a school principal and what it means to be the principal of this particular school. Anchoring our analysis in sense-making, we emphasize that “the primary site where meanings materialize that inform and constrain identity and action,” particularly in situations marked by ambiguity and uncertainty, as is true of situations anticipated and faced by new school principals with
jobs in hand (Dewey, 1919; Mills, 2003, p. 35; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). So while sense-making is triggered and influenced in part by an individual’s habits, past experiences, predispositions and purposes, and beliefs about what is and what ought to be (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988), it is also influenced by situations—not only cues extracted but also the sense that others give via their expectations and local interpretations (Louis, 1980). In this presentation, we focus on new principals’ sense-making about students and how their sense of students evolves over their first year on the job.


