

Seven-page excerpt from:

A CASE STUDY IN SOCIAL POLICY

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INTRODUCTION

My son is fourteen and white. When he was eleven, the family broke up, moved back to Manhattan from a nearby town in Rockland County, and enrolled him in the fifth grade at a small, private, elementary/middle school whose founding principle was a commitment to diversity and multicultural education.

My son's father and I share a strong commitment to these values and were delighted to find a school that embodied these principles and offered other features we considered important for our son's education and well-being. In my case, valuing diversity runs especially deep: the daughter of German Jewish Holocaust survivors, I grew up on the campus of the first historically black university in the country and spent many years as a civil-rights worker and organizer in black urban communities.

The policy issue discussed in this paper is related to these values. It took place in the school and involved my son, the school administration, and my son's classmates and their parents. Moreover, it involved race. It was therefore highly charged for me—as it was for the others involved—and for these reasons, it offers an excellent illustration of the ways in which policy formulation and implementation reflect core values within a given setting. It is also, possibly, an example of how a strong value climate and

organizational culture may have impeded fresh thinking and interfered with the speedy or successful resolution of a policy problem.

While there have been other conflicts in the school regarding race, the one described here was notable for its extraordinary duration, intensity, the degree of parental involvement and concern it aroused, and the fact that an entire class became involved.

METHODOLOGY

In formulating and evaluating the policy issue delineated in this paper, I have made use of talks with two teachers and a three-hour interview with the upper-school director, as well as an interview with the previous upper-school director, conversations with a number of the other parents in my son's class during the months that followed the incident examined here, and my own analysis.

While I believe I have presented and evaluated the policy problem fairly, I do not pretend to be dispassionate, and I use my awareness of this to experience the emotional dimensions that must at times—and sometimes, profoundly—affect those who make or implement policy.

THE POLICY ENVIRONMENT

Above all else, the school values its founding ethic—its commitment to racial, ethnic, and economic diversity—and is faithful to this principle at all levels of its organizational structure. Since its founding in 1966 by a white teacher and civil-rights activist (who retained his position as principal until 1996), the school has been a pioneer in developing academic curricula infused with social consciousness and content, and has devised and implemented some unique policies in order to fulfill its goal. For example, to

ensure representative enrollment of children from low-income families on a non-stigmatized (i.e., scholarship) basis, the school created a tuition policy that automatically sets rates on a sliding scale according to family income and other pertinent factors; approximately sixty percent of its students receive some reduction in tuition. And in order to ensure balance in the classroom, the school has a rough (i.e., approximate) type of quota system that includes racial, ethnic, and economic mix, as well as gender ratios.

Recently, the school received a grant to explore gender-equity issues and develop gender-sensitive educational materials, and is now working to pay as much attention to these issues as it has to racial, ethnic, and economic ones. This represents a small shift in policy (and value climate), and was brought about largely by parental pressure.

As a rule, parents send their children to the school primarily because they share its socio-political values. However, the school is also known for its nurturing atmosphere, academic rigor, and unique farm program. Both the school and the parents value scholarship, and graduates of the school often attend the most prestigious and competitive high schools in the city.

In order for the school to function and survive, “communication and compliance linkages” between all the actors involved in the policy process are absolutely essential, as Nakamura and Smallwood (1980) describe. It is a tiny system, comprised of administration, teaching staff, parents, students, and a board of trustees. These are all part of the policy process; they intertwine to form the three policy environments that Nakamura and Smallwood (1980) delineate, and “actors within any of [them] can influence actors in other environments.”

In the case of this small school, the three environments not only have linkages with each other, forming a circular system, they are sometimes *are* each other—at least the actors are. For example, the principal doubles as the grammar teacher, and the current upper-school director teaches computer use. One year, the principal doubled as the upper-school director when the director's daughter graduated into the upper school and the director did not wish to function in an administrative capacity vis-à-vis her child's class. As Nakamura and Smallwood (1980) write, "...actors can participate in different roles in different environments."

The various branches of the school's structure create or exercise authority over policy in different arenas or "domains," much as Van Horn et al (1992) defined them in regard to the public sector. These domains are fluid and elastic—stretching, interacting, and intersecting with each other. The boundaries between them are not rigid.

There are principle actors in—and issue characteristics of—each of these domains where policy struggles take place. The board, in accordance with its nature as a formally constituted, relatively distant organ of the school, has a policy domain that fits its scope, structure, and purpose. It makes only fundamental policy decisions, such as the level of tuition reform, but has nothing to do with student affairs or daily interpersonal conflicts that arise. In that sense, it is a discrete body, though it is composed largely of alumni, parents of former students, and others closely connected with the school.

At the level of daily affairs, teachers, administrators, and—to a lesser extent—parents, are the formulators of policy. Most student-related policy issues are dealt with on an informal and ad hoc basis: key people sit down together and talk over a problem. These are likely to include present and past teachers, upper and/or lower school directors,

the principal, and possibly parents. They then involve any agents related to the situation—inside or outside the school—that they feel might be helpful. According to the previous upper-school director, they may, for example, bring in the school psychologist, an outside psychologist, reading specialists, and so forth—anyone who might be able to provide helpful information or insight. It is an informal policy design intended to focus on each problem as much energy as is required for its resolution.

Parents form a discrete body. They influence policy through personal communication with the teachers and administration, the parents' association, and committees. Sometimes their concerns are at odds with those of the administration, and they must exert continuous pressure to get what they want. Recently, for example, parents strenuously pushed for a math consultant in the upper grades and the introduction of conflict resolution techniques devised by an outside organization.

The school is pluralistic: Implementation is multi-branched, and no one branch formulates, implements, or evaluates policy. One could not really say that there are elites in the school—it is not divided into the “few who have power and [the many] who do not,” as Dye (1994) describes elites. Some individuals are particularly active in the school community, and some have each others' ear to a greater degree than do others, but they do not function, to my knowledge, as an elite group that affects policy. Generally, the school makes concerted efforts to be as inclusive as possible, which is in line with its values. As Van Horn et al (1992) write: “Among the means [devices] used by administrators in the policy [process] are consultation, coalition-building, bargaining and compromise, exclusionary strategies, and persuasive strategies.” Of these means

available to them, the school generally uses coalition building (an inclusive strategy), though consensus building would be a more accurate description.

The school's strong value climate has not essentially changed in the thirty years since its inception, and the "play of power" among various agents and actors seems a delicate dance: The school is a social experiment and deals with difficult issues of race, class, ethnicity (and now, gender) all the time. A balancing act is always involved in its politics and play of power; heightened sensitivity is crucial to the school's survival.

New policy or policy changes that are formal tend to be made by the administrative and teaching staff, and by building consensus. According to the upper-school director, the school has formal policies regarding drugs, the use or threat of violence between students, the invocation of race in student squabbles—and now, sexist incidents or remarks. The seriousness with which racial/ethnic insults are regarded is in line with the basic values of the school, because the harm they cause is felt to be deeper and more lasting than other kinds of violations (according to the upper-school director), and the principal personally contacts the parents of the children involved in order to convey the gravity with which the school regards the infraction. Students in the upper school (fifth through eighth grades) are spoken to twice; a third infraction results in their dismissal.

Conflicts other than the ones mentioned above are either resolved by the children themselves, by teachers and children together, or with the help of the upper-school director if teachers request help. Policy regarding these conflicts is informal and ad hoc. Basic structure and guidelines exist for dealing with them, but the details of policy implementation vary according to the specifics of each case.

The usual procedure is for the teacher to speak to the parties immediately involved (i.e., two or more kids—separately or together) to try to resolve the conflict in some way. If conflict or tensions persist after these attempts at resolution by the teacher, the upper-school director is likely to be consulted. Work on the problem then continues on an “as needed” basis, according to the wisdom of the teacher and the upper-school director. This high degree of informal, discretionary, and individually tailored policy implementation is possible because of the small size and shared values of the entire school community.

In sum, it can be said that the implementation style of the school most closely resembles what Nakamura and Smallwood (1980) describe as “discretionary experimentation.” On a practical level, staff members are often both the formulators and the implementers. This is why, according to the previous upper-school director, the school “has to have terrific implementers.” They choose which discretionary options to exercise in attempting to solve policy problems—they are the bureaucrats who determine policy at the level “where the rubber meets the road.”

THE PERCEIVED POLICY PROBLEM AND ITS EVOLUTION

The way a problem is perceived, defined, and formulated is central to the possibility of its resolution, and goes to the heart of this case study. As a former psychoanalyst, I cannot resist interjecting that Freud made the same observation about the validity of psychoanalytic interpretations: Wrong interpretations, he said, simply do not work. And if I have learned one thing about policy, it is the necessity for correct analysis of a problem, since it informs all policy considerations and options that follow.