POLITICAL ECONOMY AS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
FOR THE ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL-UNIVERSITY COOPERATION

MARC C. MAHLILOS AND ROBERT L. CARPENTER
State University of New York at Binghamton

This article presents a further explication of school-university cooperation, a subject initially addressed by these authors in the Summer, 1982 issue of this Journal. Political economy theory is used as a framework for analyzing the interorganizational relationship peculiar to school-university cooperative efforts. Specific cooperative projects are examined in terms of domain and ideological consensus, interorganizational evaluation and work coordination, and their combined effect on resource maintenance/acquisition and political authority/power. Implications for practitioners, administrators and educational theorists are drawn.

Introduction
A second analysis of the cooperation described earlier (Carpenter and Mahlios, 1982) is presented with a view of analyzing the substructure of the organizational interaction. While the first analysis described school-university cooperation with an idiosyncratic focus identifying volunteerism, responsiveness, bilateral decision-making, commitment and evolution as relevant elements to the cooperative process, such a focus diverts attention from the interorganizational network, the organizational interaction itself (Getzel & Guba, 1957). An idiosyncratic focus is useful only to a point. Such analysis is to a large degree dependent on the idiosyncratic natures of the cooperating organizations. Our orientation in this analysis is to present school-university cooperation from within a more general theoretical model which treats substructural processes. It is the belief of the authors that this multi-perspective approach will have greater heuristic value.

A number of models have been advanced by sociologists over the past 15 years focusing on interorganizational relationships, the major ones being: exchange theory (Levine and White, 1961; Cook, 1977), systems theory (Turk, 1973), network analysis (Aldrich, 1980), political economy (Benson, 1975), and interorganizational dialectics (Zeit, 1980; Hegel, 1931; Marx, 1973). In each of the above a principal aim has been the development of a general theoretical framework useful for the interpretation of interorganizational interaction. Yet, as Zeit (1980) points out, few have gained widespread acceptance and still fewer, if any, have received extensive empirical testing necessary to verify the theoretical construct at its core.

The political economy approach is particularly useful in that it most closely serves our purpose of focusing on the interaction itself, and not the cooperating organizational structures. Also, a political economy perspective acknowledges the environmental forces so important in educational organizational analysis.

Viewing our interorganizational network, the Educational Research and Services Council (ERSC), (see Carpenter and Mahlios, 1982) as a political economy predicates an understanding of necessary resources and the authority structures present in the network. Money, students, personnel and information constitute the major resources distributed across the ERSC network.
Political Economy Theory

A political economic approach posits that resources and authority, their relative distribution, acquisition and defense constitute the primary objectives of network interaction. This is the substructure by which network interaction may be analyzed. (see Figure 1).

Participant organizations engage in interaction based on the following dimensions (Benson, J. K.; Kunce, J. T.; Thompson, C. A. and Allen, D. L., 1973):

1. Domain Consensus - agreement among participants in organizations regarding the appropriate role and scope of an agency.

2. Ideological Consensus - agreement among participants in organizations regarding the nature of the tasks confronted by the organizations and the appropriate approaches to those tasks.

3. Positive Evaluation - the judgment by workers in one organization of the value of the work of another organization.

4. Work Coordination - patterns of collaboration and cooperation between organizations.

These dimensions have a tendency towards balance (see Figure 1). That is, over time, a high degree of domain consensus and a low degree of work coordination within a network will evolve toward a more equilibrated condition. The more equilibrated condition is modulated by the environmental constraints within which the network operates. The degree of resource abundance available within the environment, for instance, acts as a limit on the network and could aggravate disequilibrium, or maintain a network in a disequilibrium state.

Network change may also be induced through participant organizations employing certain strategies, the specific form of which is dependent on what is available to a network and its environment. Such strategies may be characterized as cooperative, disruptive, manipulative, authoritative, or some combination thereof.

This capsule overview of the political economic perspective to interorganizational cooperation is the framework within which we will discuss school-university cooperation.

School-University Cooperation
A Political Economy Perspective

The maintenance and acquisition of resources and authority are the most fundamental objectives of cooperation. The university promoted a cooperative scheme in order to establish a higher level of legitimacy with area schools. This was expected to translate (and in some instances has) into consultanthips for faculty, involvement in grant activities (power and prestige), some influence in program decision-making (authority/power), access to research populations (resource) and provision of in-service activities (money and power). The higher level of visibility afforded the university through these activities was expected to produce higher enrollments in courses and programs (clients as a resource), and curry favor with higher university administration (favorable perception by superordinates as a resource). A political economic analysis of the situation seemed to favor cooperation. (see Figure 2).

The school districts who became directly involved in the network also sought to acquire resources, direct and inexpensive services from the university in the form of speakers, consultants, etc. Further, school districts sought to influence university faculty positively vis a vis their own program and their particular ideology or perspective (power). The involved districts positioned themselves so as to garner any resources that emerged through the cooperation (power and resources). Also some school districts were privy to information earlier than other
### FIGURE 1
EQUILIBRIUM MODEL: BALANCED + UNBALANCED INTERORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS
BY LEVELS OF SYSTEM EQUILIBRATION AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP
TO RESOURCE MAINTENANCE & ACQUISITION & POLITICAL AUTHORITY/POWER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System</th>
<th>Domain b Consensus</th>
<th>Ideological Consensus b</th>
<th>Interorganizational Evaluation b</th>
<th>Work Coordination</th>
<th>Levels of Resource Maintenance + Acquisition + Political Authority/Power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Balanced</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. High Equilibrium</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Gifted Education Workshop)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. Moderate Equilibrium</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Low Equilibrium</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Unbalanced

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity #1</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(School Board Inservice)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate/Low</td>
<td>Moderate/Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Mixed and Uneven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. Activity #2</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Mixed and Uneven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Activity #3</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate/Low</td>
<td>Moderate/Low</td>
<td>Moderate/High</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: a Adapted from Benson (1975)

b The four levels listed here are based upon normative consensus and mutual respect of individuals representing the cooperating organizations. The unit of analysis for these four levels, however, is the interorganizational/linkages and not intra-unit behavior patterns.
FIGURE 2
Various Linkage Between ERSC Members'

UNIVERSITY

Gifted Education Workshop
School Board Member Inservice Project
Violence in the Schools Conference
Interpersonal Communication
Skills Training Project
Organization of Instructional Representatives Membership
Annual Dinner

PUBLIC SCHOOLS
(A simplified representation of 15 school districts).

etc.

*Each of these linkages may be analyzed in terms of the four dimensions of political economy (domain consensus, ideological consensus, interorganizational evaluation, and work coordination).*
districts (information is seen as both a resource in itself and as a tool for acquiring power and authority).

While these various perceptions predicated the network interaction, the second level interactional dimensions (domain consensus, ideological consensus, positive evaluation and work coordination) are more useful for analyzing the network itself. These dimensions will be used to analyze two projects, one balanced, and one unbalanced in which ERSC engaged itself (See Figure 1.).

**Gifted Education Workshop**

There was high agreement between the ERSC members regarding domain consensus for gifted education. Gifted education was the domain of individual districts and no district was to be forced into providing something they were not “prepared” to provide. The university’s domain on this issue was provider of information (the “how-to” of gifted education was a scarce resource). To this end, the university sponsored a workshop for ERSC member school administrators and teachers on the development and management of gifted programs.

Ideological consensus was initially more of a problem for cooperation since while some districts rejected particular structures for service delivery on ideological grounds, there were even more fundamental differences over whether or not to actually provide any service until absolutely forced to do so. This being the case, the workshop was specifically designed to accommodate a variety of definitions and approaches to gifted education service delivery, and the cooperating school districts were free to send representatives with no obligation to act on program implementation.

Interorganizational evaluation was problematic for every issue in which we became mutually involved. A high level of competition existed between the various districts, particularly districts that saw themselves as roughly comparable in terms of SES and size. In part this was a competition over resources, public opinion being essential to create new resources (taxes, bond issues) and maintain authority. Since the public’s opinion was perceived to be in a comparative form (X school district does this, while Y district does that) it was important to denigrate or ignore the efforts of other districts. Gifted education was no exception. The university’s service involved the identification of experts and the conducting of the workshops. Thus, the competitive quality was not present. Yet, evaluation of this workshop was a vehicle for evaluating the university’s contribution in general. As the workshop involved personnel from the member districts in intense and highly participatory activities, cooperation was felt and openness and mutual respect on the part of the participants. Interorganizational evaluation, at least regarding the gifted workshop activity, was high.

With the context of the gifted education workshop, work coordination was quite high. Administrators and teachers mingled freely and participated in small groups in simulations and role plays. They interacted openly and positively to produce the requisite products for the workshop.

In sum, resource maintenance and acquisition was quite high for this activity. While there were other projects involving cooperation over gifted education in which ideological consensus and work coordination were more tenuous the gifted workshop project was very satisfactory from a political economy analysis.

**School Board Inservice**

There existed relatively high agreement between the university and area schools regarding domain consensus for the in-service education of school board members. The legal and educational aspects of school board members responsibilities
were clearly viewed as falling in the domain of the public schools. The university assembled resources to be used by board members in the clarification of their respective duties, and so such defined its domain as resource provider. Further, the university provided faculty as ‘field consultants’ to mediate interaction during in-service activities.

There was clearly less ideological consensus regarding the legal charge and substantive responsibilities of school board members as perceived by themselves and others, especially school administrators. The university did not advocate either position here as they emerged (i.e., policy development versus implementation of policy — “administration”). Thus, the best estimate of ideological consensus within this project vis-à-vis participants was moderate to low.

Interorganizational evaluation occurred in two ways. The first, and most superficial, focused on the participants assessment of the immediate outcomes of the inservice session themselves. In this instance, interorganizational evaluation was judged to be moderate, however the more substantial aspects of evaluation focused on the application of “policy making” to board members actual practices in their respective districts was low to nonexistent. This may be best explained in terms of the prevailing disparate initial motives of the organizations involved. Superintendents clearly wanted to bring about better understanding by school board members of their policy formulation function while diminishing the idea that board members could actually implement policy, i.e., act as de facto administrators. The university’s understanding and tacit support for the theoretical separation of policy formulation versus implementation clashed with its sympathy for ‘legitimate’ oversight functions of board members. Given this, it is not surprising then, that interorganizational evaluation efforts were moderate to low.

Following from the above it should come as no surprise to the reader that actual work coordination between the principal parties was low. While the efforts of the sponsoring schools and the university were not antithetical to one another, neither were they coordinate and thus whatever normative consensus and mutual respect potentially available along this dimension was never realized.

The cumulative effect, along these four dimensions, of the interaction within this project as an unbalanced and highly disequilibrious state of interorganizational interaction resulting in relatively low levels of resource and power acquisition.

The usefulness of these case studies go beyond their obvious implications for projects of the kind described here. Based upon the scanty research conclusion to date and our first hand experience, the following recommendations are proposed.

For Participants in School-University Cooperative Projects

Decisions by public school and university personnel to engage in cooperative educational projects should be predicated upon some measure of the predictive utility of the proposed project. Too often such decisions appear to be based upon considerable leaps of faith in the possible outcomes of such cooperations and too little upon a rational framework that at least reduces the ambiguity surrounding institutional interactions.

For Educational Practitioners

To say that school-university cooperation is wrought with controversy is to obviate the obvious. It seems likely that much of this historical controversy can be traced to fundamental misunderstandings participants hold about the nature of cooperative ventures in education. A model such as that advanced here, may hold promise for providing educators a
more viable base from which to view and construct worthwhile cooperations.

For Administrators

The reality of scarce resources in public education in the 1980's is increasingly apparent to school administrators at all levels. In order to meet the costs of promoting new and maintaining existing high quality programs increased emphasis will have to be given to cooperation among the various members of the education community. While some will view these collective activities as necessary evils to be tolerated, broader minded educators will recognize this blessing in disguise for what it is — namely a unique opportunity to fashion a more comprehensive approach toward universal education for all of our citizenry. Thus cooperation means not only good management and planning but sound policy as well.

For Scholars

Central to the work of educational scholars is the development of theory and its validation through empirical research. The model presented here, and our efforts at an intuitive analyses provides data that may be viewed as providing some validation of the political-economy theory as applied and the interorganizational interaction of education organizations.

References


Somebody Else's Kid. Torey L. Hayden. G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1981. 330 pp. It was the class that did not even exist on the books — four kids with serious learning problems who had slipped into the cracks of a program to integrate special education students into regular classrooms. Four special students and a dedicated teacher who refused to conform. In the group of special students was first, Boo, seven, half black, half white, whose only speech was in the form of days, and had no words of his own. Next was Lori, also seven, bright articulate, sensitive, kind, and suffering from brain damage that left her without the ability to read. When Tomato, ten going on forty, arrived, he brought with him anger, violence, scars of a long migrant life, and the ghost of his father whom he had seen murdered by his step-mother five years earlier. And last came Claudia, the normal child, who was shy, quiet, academically gifted, twelve years old, and pregnant. One by one they came to Torey's resource room where they learned to manage together, but could not manage alone. Together they became a class.