

The Performativity of Organizational Culture in a No Excuses Charter School

Dissertation Chapter

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Introduction

One tenant of organizational scholarship is to create practically relevant knowledge (Nicolai and Seidl 2010). In an ideal world, researchers would develop robust theories of how organizations work that stakeholders would use to create strategies to achieve their collective purpose. In some cases, organizations do create strategies according to evidence-based best practices. Sometimes they succeed. Sometimes they do not.

At the heart of this science-driven process of organizational change is a set of central questions. What counts as a valid implementation of the theory? How do you know if the strategy was a success? If it fails, how do you know whether it was something you did or something wrong with the theory? When do you give up on the theory?

Organizational scholarship is in a weak position to answer these kinds of practical questions a priori. Along with most of the social sciences, organizational research typically approaches the world in a piecemeal fashion, using different theories to identify a variety of mechanisms that sometimes work in different conditions (Davis & Marquis 2005; Hedstrom & Swedberg 1998). We look to institutional fields and entrepreneurs to understand where the ideas

come from (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings 2002; Lounsbury 2002; Lounsbury and Crumley 2007). We look at the procedures and routines within which strategy is reviewed, assessed, and updated (Cohen 1991; Gavetti, Levinthal, & Ocasio 2007; March & Simon 1958; Pentland et al 2012; Zollo and Winter 2002).

However, for actors in organizations, these questions are tied together. Organizational strategy involves trying to tie these mechanisms together into an orchestral order. To explain how organizations adopt research-based strategies and succeed, we need theories that also tie these disparate mechanisms into a model of intentional, organizational change. In this paper, I use performativity theory to develop a model for how organizations pursue performative strategies.

This model is based on a case study of a No Excuses charter school attempting to translate research into strategy. I argue that the school was attempting to bring the concept of organizational culture into being in order to control student behavior. I document four stages the school moved through to create its theory-based culture, assess its impact, and tweak it for next year. These stages are arranged into recurring performance cycles, the results of one cycle feeding into the next. At each stage, performativity takes different forms and failures led the school evermore astray. When the school did not succeed in controlling student behavior, explanations abounded. Despite the failure, they did not abandon their theory. Instead, they muddled through. Performativity theory helps explain why and sheds light on how we can build theories that perform.

Performativity Theory in Organizational Analysis

Performativity is a type of social construction wherein the application of a concept causes the concept to become real or true (Gond, Cabantous, Harding, & Learmonth, 2016). This is

different from a self-fulfilling prophecy in that self-fulfilling prophecies become real because people believe them. Performative concepts become real or true because people create things that make them true (Callon 2007).¹ Many different kinds of concepts have been argued to be performative from biology (Latour 1987) to economic theory (Callon, 2007; MacKenzie, 2003; MacKenzie & Millo, 2003) to gender (Butler 1988). Recently, organizational scholars have begun looking at the extent to which organizational theories are performative.

The hypothesis that organizational research is performative is straightforward. Corporate governance, structure, strategy, and culture result from choices organizations make and these choices are very often informed by the latest science. In following through on these choices, organizations can create the reality academics theorize (Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton 2005; 2009). Scholars have begun looking for cases of performativity in the organizational field. For example, D'Adderio and Pollock (2014) show how theories of organizational modularity influenced organizational design. Other cases include advertising companies using auction theory to create auctions to sell advertisements online (Glaser, Fiss, & Kennedy, 2016) and using an honor code to instill theory-laden values (Gehman, Trevino, & Garud, 2013).

With collaborators, Dobbin has argued that shareholder value and agency theory were at the heart of corporate governance reform in the last decades of the twentieth century (Dobbin and Jung 2010, Dobbin and Zorn 2005). In the 1970s, organizational scholars studying principal-agent theory portrayed the central problem of organizational action to be how owners (the “principals”) could shape the behavior of managers (“their agents”) (Jensen and Meckling 1978; Fama 1980; Fama and Jensen 1983). Their solution was shareholder value theory which argued

¹ In this way, performativity is the *goal* of evidence-based practice.

the central role of the firm was to make money for owners and offered a set of practices like performance-based pay for executives and debt financing to ensure this goal was met. Shareholder value subsequently became a prominent concept in the field, organizing the way many investors, analysts, and executives articulated their interests. Despite the dominance of the concept, Dobbin and Jung argue that the executive capture of corporate boards led companies to only adopt the recommended strategies that favored executives creating a perversely incentivized governance system with high risk exposure. While these measures performed by increased stock prices in the short run, they exacerbated the financial crisis of 2008.

The failure of shareholder value to be fully implemented and to then lead to dangerous and irresponsible levels of risk point to the need for organizational scholars to better understand performativity and the effects our work has on people and markets, more broadly. To do that, we need to better understand how organizations perform theory. However, it is exactly here that existing research and theory fall short.



Figure 1: The Performative Model of Social Construction

Performance is the process whereby a theory-based system is tested, tweaked, and retested (see Figure 1) (Callon 2007). The feedback loop constituting performance has never empirically examined. Instead, most researchers gloss over the iterations, presenting the cycle as simply an arrow whereby theorists create socio-technical systems which perform theory. Yet, during this process actors are answering the essential questions: does the theory work? Is this a

felicitous implementation? Is this good performance? Why are bad performances happening? Should we abandon the system?

In the remainder of this paper, I open the black box of performance by studying how a charter school goes about iterating on a theoretically-motivated organizational culture. I use field observations, interviews, and archival analysis to observe how the school creates culture, focusing on the key initiative during the 2014-2015 school year. Based on this data, I have developed a model of cultural performance moving through five stages. Each of these stages presents untheorized pathways for performativity to succeed or fail which I outline next. I conclude by discussing the implications of this study for intentional change in general and for research on organizational culture and performativity theory in particular.

Culture as Performative Theory

Culture is one of many domains in which organizational theories have crossed over into practice. The cultural turn in organizational analysis in the 1980s translated into an explosion of academic research and popular management writing (see Weeks 2004 for an analysis and Chatman and O'Reilly, 2016 for a recent review). Today, culture is a mainstay in management classes, the mainstream management press, and the board room (Graham, Harvey, Popadak, & Rajgopal, 2016). The cultural theories that develop at the interface between researchers and managers are almost always constructed from the perspective of organizational leadership with the concomitant prescriptions for how to create culture "from the top down" (Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2013). The explicit purpose of designing and creating an organizational culture is to improve organizational performance (Schein 2010).

This approach to culture situates it as an input into organizational life determining performance (Harrison & Carroll 2006, O'Reilly & Chatman 1996). In this view, culture is the set of beliefs, values, and norms endorsed by the organization and shared by members. This

culture-as-an-input effects performance by enabling members to coordinate their behavior to accomplish goals. This contrasts with a second way culture is traditionally approached in organizational analysis – as the effervescent output of organizational life (Chatman and O'Reilly 2016). In this approach, organizational performance drives culture. Culture is made up of the beliefs, values, and norms members exemplify and express as a result of their experiences working together in routines, practices, events, and procedures (Martin 2002, Smircich 1983).

Few studies examine culture as both an input and output (see Kunda 2009 and Weeks 2004 for exceptions). Given the ubiquitous focus on managing through culture, we need a theoretical framework that explains the interplay between theorized culture being input into an organization and the culture that comes out. Performativity provides this framework. Performance is the term used to refer to the interaction between theory-driven inputs and performative outputs.

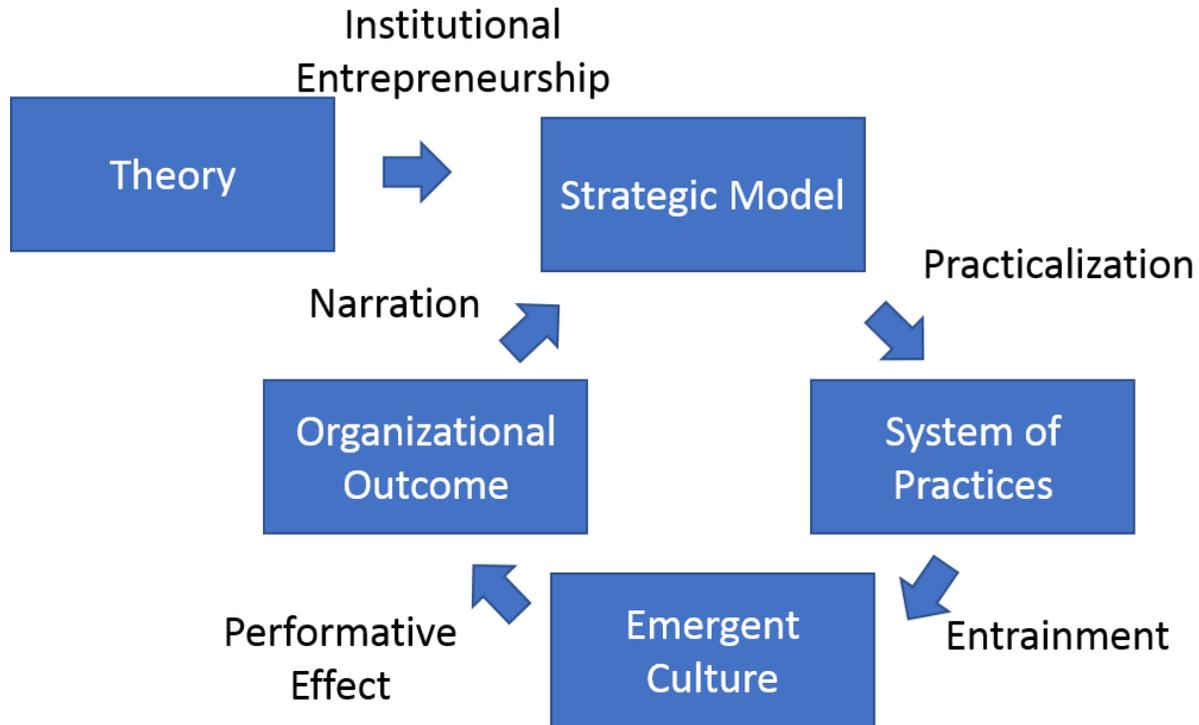


Figure 2: Model of the Cultural Performance Cycle

A Model of Cultural Performance

Figure 2 contains the model that best captures the process by which the charter school attempted to create a science-based organizational culture. Consistent with prior work, I treat performance as an iterative cycle of trial and error. The model begins with the invention of new models for school culture which many schools adopted as a strategy. Having adopted this model, the school designs and pursues a system of practices and measures their outcome. They review the whole endeavor, creating narratives of “what happened” from theory to implementation to outcomes which then inform the next cycle.

There are a couple key points guiding the model. First, the standards for success or failure change at each stage. For example, the failure to create a system of practices represents an invalid performance. However, a failure to generate the expected outcomes means the theory was wrong, assuming the organization moved through the preceding stages successfully. Second,

this model is not only appropriate for performing culture. The stages are framed in terms of culture: “strategic culture,” “entrainment,” “emergent culture.” Yet, they can be treated more generically: “strategy,” “mobilization,” “realized behavior.” This is important because the model is not simply an application of performativity to organizational cases, but a distinctly organizational theory of performativity (King, Felin, & Whetten 2010; Oswick, Fleming, & Hanlon 2011).

Institutional Entrepreneurship and Strategic Culture. The most well-established step in performance is the connection between entrepreneurs and strategy. In the first step, institutional entrepreneurs translate theory into practicable models. In Dobbin and Jung’s (2010) account, this translation process involved agency theorists promulgating new rules and policies meant to make corporate governance activities align with shareholder interests. Contrast this with MacKenzie’s studies (2003, with Millo 2003) wherein economists create financial firms to pursue trading strategies indicated by their models. Organizational theory performs through strategy – the collective agreement and formal decision making that distinguishes organizations as social actors from organizations as media for other social forces (King, Felin, & Whetten 2010).

In this study, the translation process involved a generation of educational managerialists linking organizational culture to educational outcomes and creating charter schools to make it so. The school studied here translated this theory into a model of how instilling a specific set of values, beliefs, and norms in staff and students would lead to student achievement. This is what I call the *strategic culture*. The strategic culture is the set of beliefs, values, and norms which an organization formally endorses and expects members to abide by because the organization believes the culture will achieve the organization’s goals. The point of success or failure at this

stage depends on the fit between model and theory and the internal logic of the model. The model has to be a valid application of the theory and should be logically consistent. Otherwise, the subsequent stages will be misguided (if it is invalid) or unsound (if logically inconsistent).

Practicalization and System of Practices. Practicalization is the process by which an organization designs a system of inter-related routines, procedures, and policies which will make the culture real. The resulting system of practices is commonly referred to as the socio-technical system or what Cabantous and Gond (2011) refer to as performative praxis. The practice design process has been one of the more under-studied aspects of performance. In their study of performativity in online advertisements, Glaser, Fiss, & Kennedy (2016) find that the practices around selling online advertisements were developed through analogical reasoning – each practice was made to look like a practice in auction markets. Performativity theorists and organizational scholars must study practicalization and systems of practices in order to questions like: are theories that come with recommended practices more likely to be implemented than those that do not? Should organization develop their own systems? When do organizations create new systems and when do they adapt existing ones?

Following Bourdieu, I call this process practicalization because the standard for success in this stage is whether members are able to produce and reproduce the ostensive values, norms, and beliefs in their daily practices (Bourdieu 1977; Cabantous and Gond 2011; Feldman and Pentland 2003). Failure in this stage occurs either via classic policy-practice decoupling, when organizations adopt a model overtly but do nothing to pursue it, or by designing an impractical system (Bromley & Powell 2011; Meyer & Rowan 1977). Schools have traditionally been decoupled organizations (Weick 1976), but this has changed with increased regulatory

accountability (Hallet 2010). As I will show, the school was tightly coupled, working diligently to have staff produce the culture by embedding it in the schools established routines.

Entrainment and Emergent Culture. Where people produce culture in practice, organizations of people produce culture through entrainment. Borrowed from music and biology, entrainment describes how agents (whether particles, instruments, or people) come to resonate together across distinct activities through some control mechanism(s) (McGrath 1990; Clayton, 2012; Letiche & Hagemeyer, 2004). The values, beliefs, and norms which manage to be reproduced across disparate practices make up the emergent culture. It is what traditional performance theorists like Butler (1988) and Goffman (1959) would call the “performance” itself.

Success or failure in this stage depends on whether the actual values, beliefs, and norms expressed match those envisioned by strategy. Mismatch can occur if entrainment fails to yield harmonization or if a different culture emerges. In his famous study of a British bank, John Weeks (2004) showed how executives’ efforts to change the culture of complaint actually fed more complaint. By participating in the many programs to stem complaining, workers appropriated the programs as a way to complain about new things. The essential empirical questions worth studying are what forces affect resonance across practices and when does entrainment lead to emergent cultures that converge or diverge from expectation?

Performative Effect and Organizational Outcomes. One of the central claims of performativity is that theory creates reality (Gond et al 2016). The truth of this claim is determined at this stage. Even if organizations manage to create the culture they want, this does mean it will have the effect they expected or that the effects will be recognizable. Performative

effect refers to the effects of the emergent culture. Organizational outcomes are the observations organizations make to measure the success of their strategy.

Members of the school care about things like student test scores, college acceptance, and rates of punishment. In this case, they want to reduce misbehavior. The performative effect they hope for is good behavior from students while the outcome they plan to observe is fewer demerits, sendouts, and suspensions. Failure at this stage means that the emergent culture failed to effect measured outcomes. This can happen for many reasons such as if the effects are weak or unrelated to the observed outcomes, if there are unanticipated negative effects, or if the outcomes are measured poorly.

Narration and Performance Cycles. Performativity theorists argue epistemic power lies in discourse rather than some clearly visible reality or facts (Chen 2013, Gehman & Soublière 2017, Gond et al 2016; Kornberger & Clegg 2011). We create what is real by describing it. Narration is the organizational process of review and re-strategization whereby members reflect on the performance in light of the outcome, posit explanations, and plot new courses for next year, or rather, the next performance cycle. Narratives are not bounded by cycles. Instead, they cumulate across cycles as they repeat over time.

Performance cycles can be made up of sub-cycles and be part of super-cycles. In this study, the school has a cycle timed with the school year from strategizing and designing systems over the summer, to entraining staff early in the year to an end-of-year review process. However, the school also organized reviews at points throughout the year. These preliminary reviews were limited in their scope, staff were circumspect in their changes to strategy, and system changes were limited. These are sub-cycles. At the same time, when I started my observation they were already in the middle of a multi-year process of changing their strategic culture, a super-cycle.

The transition from one cycle to the next, when outcomes are translated into new strategies via narration, is perhaps the most important of all. It is here that members of the organization decide whether *they believe* they were successful and whether they should continue with or abandon their model. It is here that organizations decide whether to persist, change, or abandon their models. Failure in this stage occurs when narratives make the wrong diagnosis or prescribe the wrong treatment. Cycles on the other hand, fail because stages fail to materialize. For example, if no system of practices is put in place or narration does not take place, then the cycle is broken. This represents a failure to perform as opposed to a failure of performance.

Case Study: A year in the Life of a No Excuses Charter School

Charter schools represent a revolution in the organization of schooling in the United States.

Thousands of privately run but publicly-funded schools have been licensed to serve millions of students with the belief that these schools can better educate students than traditional schools.

However, research on charter schools is stuck on two related puzzles. First, charter schools represent the ideal case for innovation: wholly new organizations created to be innovative and given waivers from laws and policies that typically regulate public schools. Yet, they look the same as most any other school with regular school days, classes broken up by age and subject, and teachers teaching groups of 20-30 students. (The widespread homogeneity in structure among schools has been noted for decades (Goodlad 1984).)

Second, research has shown that certain charter schools, in particular so-called No Excuses schools, are more effective at educating students than traditional schools. Yet, studies attribute their effectiveness to more tutoring and longer school days, which amounts to more of the same education rather than any novel structures or practices (Gleason et al., 2010; Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), 2009; Hoxby, Murarka, & Kang, 2009; National

Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2014). We are left wondering whether charter schools are different in any meaningful way and whether these purported differences lead to better outcomes for students. I decided to perform an in-depth case study of one successful, No Excuses school to study how they are trying to create organizational change in the highly institutionalized field of education (Payne 2008).

Using my social network, I gained entrance to Achievement College Prep in February 2014. Achievement College Prep is a high-performing, No Excuses charter school in an urban area in the northeastern United States. It predominantly serves black and Hispanic students from low-income families from grades six to twelve (i.e. from 12 years old through graduation). Despite demographic disadvantages, students' test scores are among the highest in the state by the time they reach tenth grade. This is particularly notable given that these same students are behind the state's average in their 6th through 8th year test scores according to the state's school credit card report. Every student who graduated from Achievement has gone on to college and nearly all go on to get a four-year degree.

I spent the first six months getting acclimated to the routines of the school, talking with staff, and observing a range of activities. During what I call my focal year, the 2014-2015 academic year, I performed non-participant observation in meetings, classrooms, shared spaces, and school events to get a multi-level, longitudinal view of the evolution of the changes the school pursued during the year. After the focal year, I spent five months performing interviews follow up observations.

After the focal year, I performed interviews with a dozen key informants to learn about the school's history and about staff's experience with the changes in the school at the heart of my study. These interviews provided invaluable access to the reasoning behind many decisions by

senior administrators and how they were received and carried out by managers and teachers. Finally, I also collected archival data by scraping the school's share drive containing a variety of documents, including meeting agenda and notes, teachers' lesson plans, and teaching material. For this paper, these archives are used to quantify the discussion of culture during the year.

I approached data analysis by integrating these data to develop a theoretical model (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007) using an inductive case method. I chunked the school's changes into four themes: culture, common core, professionalization, and instruction. For each theme, I tried to answer a set of questions. 1) What change are they pursuing? 2) Why are they making the change? 3) What was the strategy for achieving the change? 4) How did the strategy play out during the focal year, and 5) What were the results at the end. These questions did not emerge from the observations themselves as would be case in grounded theory (Glasser and Strauss 1967); but were determined a priori from the research question.

The question of how the school pursued change requires a narrative answer (Abbott 2004). I constructed a narrative by reading my field notes and interviews and setting aside chunks that spoke to specific questions. I translated these into a single, multi-vocal narrative of how the change occurred. With this narrative in place, I returned to the literature to understand what these cases of change were represented of and attempted to reconcile theories about such cases with the narrative here. As I argue next, the culture the school was trying to create is a case of performativity. The theoretical model I built represents the translation of performativity theory into a narrative model of generic, sequential stages capable of explaining this case.

Results

Institutional Entrepreneurs create a Strategic Culture

I argued earlier that organizational culture is a performative concept in management. This is true for education as well where the concept was imported by managerial scholars translating

research into the field. The institutional entrepreneurs who created and continue to build No Excuses schools put organizational culture at the center of their philosophy (Thernstrom & Thernstrom 2004). The leaders of these schools and, in many cases, their teachers share a conception of what values, norms, and beliefs they should abide by to achieve teach disadvantaged students and send them to college (Lake, Dusseault, Bowen, Demeritt, & Hill, 2010). The theory is that setting high academic and behavioral expectations will give disadvantaged students a cultural “toolkit” of skills and habits they can use to attain the academic and personal success of their advantaged peers (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003).

The No Excuses model fits the mold of treating culture as an input. As in management, the field of education largely treated culture as an outcome of students and staff behavior. For example, Coleman and Johnstone (1963) looked at the culture of academics and athletics among adolescents. Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Willis (1977) looked at the ways in which the school reproduced class and work culture. In the 1980s and 1990s, organizational scholars approaching culture as an input turned their eyes towards schools (Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993). Research on culture and climate in schools positioned culture as one of the main levers affecting organizational success. This quickly translated into a focus on studies in how to *create culture* through leadership (Campo, 1993; Firestone & Wilson, 1985; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990).

It was out of this milieu that No Excuses charter schools were founded: Kipp in 1994; Uncommon Schools in 1997, YES Prep in 1998, Achievement First in 1999, and Aspire Charter Schools in 1999 (Cheng, Hitt, Kisida, & Mills, 2015; Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005). Important too was the founding of Teach for America in 1989 whose alumni founded many of these schools, lead school districts, and write educational policy from think tanks (Angrist, Pathak, & Walters,

2013; Lake, Dusseault, Bowen, Demeritt, & Hill, 2010). These were the initial institutional entrepreneurs who seeded the movement. At the heart of this movement is the belief that educational inequality can be solved by good management (Trujillo, Scott, & Rivera 2017).

In sum, organizational culture as a theory of how organizations effectively coordinate members came to prominence at the same time that a cohort of institutional entrepreneurs in education sought to address systemic social inequalities by creating more effectively managed schools. These entrepreneurs, like generations of managerialist reformers before them (Cuban & Tyack 1995; Mehta 2013), transposed the solutions offered by management into the problem space of public education. In so doing, they created a theory of organizational culture where, if schools could create a culture of high expectations that taught discipline to students they could provide disadvantaged students with the educational success their peers receive. They could close the achievement gap.

Achievement's Local Strategic Culture

By the time I started my observation, Achievement College Prep had been building its culture for a decade. Staff had their own take on what high expectations and tight discipline meant for them and what practices they should use to go about realizing them. In the following field note from a hot day in early August, Kim the Executive Director spent an hour explaining the school's philosophy. At the end, she summarized her point this way:

“If you walk away with a couple talking points, I want it to be: the vision (of closing the achievement gap), that our two-part mission is how we make that vision a reality, and that achieving the mission is about having a vibrant culture. In order [to have a vibrant culture], you have to have the most exceptional adults that are working and aligning to those values. These five values really ground our

work. When we think about our decisions, we go back to our values to see how our decisions are leveraging our values to achieve our mission.

From day one, staff (and students) learn that culture is the cornerstone of managing education. For staff, this means living out the five values which include “Everyone is here for the same reason” and “Staff actions drive student results.”

The culture is manifested across a variety of established practices. For example, the school has held weekly, all-school meetings called community meetings for most of its existence. During community meetings, one staff member gives the Douglass Award to a student who shows academic and ethical excellence. As the following excerpt shows, giving the award is a chance for staff to reaffirm the school’s beliefs and values and point to students and behaviors exemplifying them.

Margaret, an English teacher, is called on to deliver the Douglass Award. She begins, “Effort determines success. Effort determines success. We say it a lot, but we don’t stop to think about what it actually means. This student exemplifies it.” Margaret lists a number of virtues the student possesses: independence, self-advocacy, and others. She fleshes out some of the details around how the student exemplifies independence in learning English, but also mentions how the student’s independence can lead to conflict and stubbornness. Margaret then quotes two teachers’ valorizations of the students and then reveals who it is. The students erupt in loud applause and audible cheers. The students and adults end with a choreographed chant, “Effort!” “Determines!” “Success!”

Not only does the Douglass Award create the incentive for students to do their work and behave, it also provides a venue for staff to discursively reiterate the schools culture, to legitimize, exemplify, and dramatize the success that comes to those who abide by the culture.

Tuning Strategic Culture: Becoming “Warm but Strict”

During my study, the school was in the middle of a multi-year process of shifting their disciplinary system from the strict rule enforcement and harsh discipline typical of No Excuses schools to one that was “warm but strict.” Their model was strict in that students were punished for small infractions like getting a book from their desk (“Being Unprepared”) dropping their pencils (“Disruption”), or not sitting up straight (“Posture”). The harsh portion of the model meant that the punishments for these small infractions escalated quickly. For example, the school regularly suspended half of its students in a given year, a rate not uncommon among No Excuses schools (Golann 2015; Goodman 2008).

Rather than be harsh and strict, the school’s leaders decided the culture should be strict but more “warm.” During the all staff orientation in 2014, the school’s director Kim explained the causal logic behind their strict discipline. Citing Wilson and Kelling’s (1982) “broken windows” theory of crime, she argued that strict punishment for minor violations prevented the emergence of more serious rule violations.

The problem, as they saw it, was that harsh punishment for mild misbehavior led corroded relationships between students and staff and prevented students from learning by excluded them from class. To reduce the harshness of the rules, the school changed its punishment policies, reducing what was considered an infraction and eliminating suspension as a form of punishment for most infractions. As a result, the school’s suspension rate dropped from almost fifty percent in 2010 to ten percent in 2013.

To make their culture more “warm,” they advocated a set of practices teachers should use when managing their classroom including “proactive management,” “rational detachment,” and “assuming the best.” Using these practices, teachers could prevent rule violations, apply rules without making them personal, and were given discretion in determining whether some behavior constituted a rule violation. This latter change is particularly critical.

Under “warm strict” management, staff believed teachers would give fewer demerits and send outs by not holding to the letter of the law, but giving students the benefit of the doubt. Whereas before, any errant behavior was to result in a demerit, under warm strict, teachers were told to assume the best and read intent. This allowed teachers not to punish students for accidents or temporary lapses in judgment, but to focus on students who *intentionally* broke the rules. (However, some rules like cursing were too serious to allow even if they were considered accidental.)

During all staff orientation in 2014, the Richard, the Dean of Student Life, and David, the Dean of Academic Life, discuss how the warm strict approach is meant to work with teachers:

David begins, “Alright, what were some of the key take-aways?” A teacher answers “Assuming the best and remain positive.” Another teacher adds, “if a kid whispers to another student, we may assume they’re off task, but sometimes we may be too quick to say, “demerit” and they may just have a question.”

(...)

Rich steps in and adds, “We’re not saying don’t send kids out. What we’re saying is that, our proactive action, what are we doing to prevent it from being a repeat offense? We’re being consistent. There’s a consistent process and students know what to expect. Staff values underlie our work: everyone is here for the same thing...”

Reading intent, along with other warm practices, is meant to reduce misbehavior and thereby reduce punishment. As the first example indicated, reading intent means not punishing to the rule, but ensuring that students’ *intended* to break the rule.

There was a contradiction within this strategic culture however. “Reading intent” gave teachers discretion in whether to punish a student and this discretion contradicted the foundation of staff authority vis-à-vis students: consistency.

Essential to the legitimacy of the disciplinary system is consistency. Consistency means that the rules are the same everywhere and everyone knows them. This has several critical implications. First it implies that all students are always disciplinable: no student or teacher can say “I didn’t know that was not allowed.” It also means any staff member can take on any role in the school at any time and be recognized as a legitimate authority. It means students can expect to be treated the same no matter who they are interacting with. And, students can build relationships with any staff member.

“Reading intent” causes problems for consistency. Before “warm strict,” simply observing a student slouching or spacing-off warranted a demerit. Enforcement was out of the teachers’ hands. With ‘reading intent,’ what one teacher sees as intentional another may see as accidental.

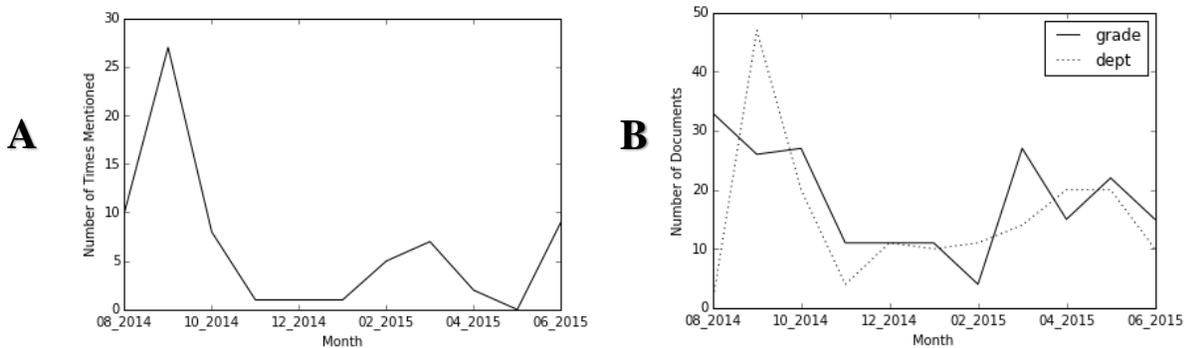
Structuring Practices

To create a warm strict culture, the school’s leaders launched the “Culture of Consistency” initiative at the beginning of my focal year. The idea was to get teachers to establish consistent discipline in their classes early in the year. The belief was that, once established, this culture would perpetuate itself. Administrators pursued this goal by repurposing existing routines rather than creating new ones. They set aside time during existing routines like orientation, department meetings, grade level meetings, and faculty meetings to legitimize, demonstrate, and discuss consistency with staff. What emerged however was often very different from what they intended.

When the culture of consistency initiative was presented to staff during all staff orientation, school leaders presented it with a causal argument: an early emphasis on consistency

would establish classroom norms which would become self-sustaining. The Dean of Academic Life told teachers, “You set the tone and culture of your classroom in September. You can tweak it, but you can’t change it. So, it’s all about September and setting the tone you want for the entire year.”

To help teachers establish this culture in their everyday practice, the administration embed it in the school’s normal routines early in the year. (Once the initial push was over, they would return the routines to their normal foci.) An analysis of the frequency of the root “consisten-” in meeting agenda and notes from grade level and department meetings (Figure 3: **Frequency of Meetings and Mentions of Consistency in 2014-2015. A) Monthly Number of Times "Consistency" Mentioned in Grade Level and Department Meeting Notes, B) Monthly Number of Meeting Notes from Grade Level and Department Meetings; C) Monthly Proportion of Meeting Notes mentioning "Consistency"**) shows that consistency played a substantial role in the first two months of meetings and then declined precipitously.



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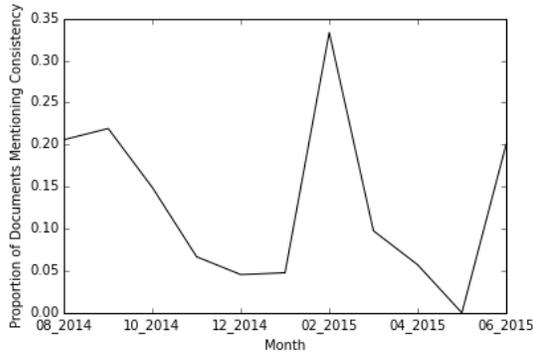


Figure 3: Frequency of Meetings and Mentions of Consistency in 2014-2015.

A) Monthly Number of Times

"Consistency" Mentioned in Grade Level and Department Meeting Notes, **B)**

Monthly Number of Meeting Notes from Grade Level and Department Meetings;

C) Monthly Proportion of Meeting Notes mentioning "Consistency"

As I show next, embedding consistency in existing routines provided the administration with the ability to legitimize the system to teachers, have teachers practice using it on students, and spend time collectively solving problems with consistency. The goal of the initiative was to turn the idea of warm strict culture into a set of practical steps and behaviors teachers could use early in the year that, if carried out, would institute a warm strict culture. By repeatedly revisiting consistency across routines, teachers would become entrained to seeing their role as creating culture by enforcing consistency. Despite this entrainment, the actual conversations, demonstrations, and problem solving varied in ways that undermined consistency.

Emergent Culture

There is a difference between what you want to do, what you try to do, and what you ultimately accomplish. For Achievement College Prep, emergent culture is the culture that occurred: the beliefs made salient, the norms established, and the values valorized during the practices which ultimately took place. In my focal year, three types of action constituted the emergent culture: the realized practices, ancillary actions, and exogenous actions.

Realized Practices

The school followed through on its plan to discuss consistency in its normal routines. I refer to these actual conversations that took place according to the plan as realized practices. The effect of these meetings was entrainment: getting staff talking about and problem solving around consistency. However, what staff were entrained to was not always congruent with the logic of the strategy.

Orientation was a forum for administrators to explain the strategy to staff, provide staff with scripts to legitimizing warm strict consistency to one another and students, and provide staff with an opportunity to practice disciplining students through the new culture. In the following excerpt from new staff orientation, staff were put into groups and given disciplinary scenarios. They had to determine if a student's actions warranted a verbal warning, demerit, or send out and then role-play giving the punishment to the student:

The scenario on the PowerPoint reads: "In class, Grover is slouched down even after a whole class reminder about posture. You say, 'Grover, you have a demerit for posture' and he responds, 'for what?'"

The consensus is red cards for a send out. (Students are not allowed to react to a demerit.) One teacher who didn't give a red card speaks up, "Maybe they didn't hear?" "No" David says "For what' is usually not an 'I didn't hear,' but an asking for justification or a complaint."

To one of the teachers who held up a red card, Rich says: "Okay, give me the demerit." The teacher obliges, "Rich, you have a demerit." "FOR WHAT?!" Rich responds heatedly. The new teacher is taken aback by the character Rich put on and stumbles into silence. David picks up the conversation, "what's the terminology for back talk?" Another teacher reiterates, "But what do you do if they don't hear you?" "They'll hear you" David answers and then demonstrates the recommended response if they don't hear, "you have a demerit for posture, sit up."

This excerpt exemplifies how orientation provides teachers with the categories, beliefs, and norms they will need in the classroom. There is practice classifying behaviors – "students don't say 'for what?' because they don't hear you." When responding to a student, the tone should be calm and direct: "you have a demerit for posture, sit up." During orientation, the realized

practices give teachers the emotional, technical, and normative skills needed to do warm strict discipline.

In department and grade level meetings on the other hand, teachers discussed consistency as problems of instruction and systems respectively. Department meetings are meant to help teachers develop their curriculum (what is taught) and instruction (how it is taught). In department meetings, the culture of consistency initiative was treated as an extension of instruction. During the first math department meeting of the year, the chair Matt went through the culture issues in his class: “I was trying to have a 25 person discussion at 3:00 when the room was 92 degrees. I projected poorly. I was too quick to call on someone. I was like, ‘I got three more things to get to. You!’” Discipline is not the only way to engender a set of values, norms, and beliefs in classrooms. Culture is just as much a result of the activities students do in class, who a teacher calls on, and how mistakes are managed. In focusing on creating culture through instruction, departments translated the initiative into a different and incommensurate frame.

In contrast, one of the primary roles of grade level teams is to ensure teachers in a grade level all align their systems and enforce the same rules. The culture of consistency initiative should fit directly into the normal conversations of grade level teams. This was not the case however. In the following note from the twelfth grade team’s first meeting of the year, teachers report many divergent practices and the conversation does not make them consistent:

Dawn, the grade level team leader, started the meeting by having teachers write down notes for anything they wanted to discuss. The teachers write silently and then Dawn brings them back, pointing to Maggie, one of the teachers, “I want to start with you.” Maggie begins, “Seniors are still having trouble reading the schedule. They’re not used to it. I still had to tell them, ‘hey buddy, you’re up here [in this room].’”

Edith adds, “I’ve been using more send outs.” Dawn replies, “We’re trying to work on other teacher tricks before it’s a send out.” “You can only try so many teacher tricks,” Edith says, “For my first class, only six students were there for the first half because they were in college prep.” Another teacher seconds this, “I’m seeing late seniors in the hallway. Just, between classes, I have a few tardies.” Matt says, “I want to ditto

what's been said. I'm okay not doing them (giving tardy demerits to seniors). But, I've not been told, 'don't do it.'" Dawn says, "I think it goes along with what you want to do. What I've heard from seniors is that they like that things are different from one teacher to the next."

This note reveals three ways in which teachers' actions in the grade level team diverged from the culture of consistency initiative. Both Edith and Dawn reverse the causal arrow of culture, using punishment (or not) to create culture; whereas, the consistency initiative sought to establish culture and thereby reduce send outs. Second, there is a counter-culture in the twelfth grade: the teachers view inconsistency as more "collegiate" because college courses all have different rules. Finally, in this meeting and others, teachers uniformly reported being lenient on tardy demerits early in the year because of students' schedules. The meeting does not conclude with a plan to create consistency, but instead to institute it.

Conversations early in the year reveal the ways in which teachers' behavior converged and diverged from the goals of the consistency initiative. Even though the culture of consistency initiative was repeatedly discussed (entrainment), these discussions reproduce the initiative clearly, uniformly, or cogently.

These divergent practices undermined teachers' sense that they were consistent with one another. In interviews and observations of end-of-year review meetings, staff reported that the school never "felt consistent." For example, one teacher reported there were things she would do during transitions that other teachers wouldn't and that, during grade level meetings, they would discuss consistency but never actually followed through on making any changes. Another reported that a colleague "just decided to do whatever the hell she wanted because that's just how she is."

Ancillary and Exogenous Actions

Every stage in the performance model is susceptible to disruption from outside forces: whether confusion with other theories and models, conflicting routines, or unforeseen events. During my

focal year this was best exemplified by two culture-related processes outside the culture of consistency initiative. First, the school continued to change its systems and procedures throughout the year, making it difficult for teachers to keep up with what rules to apply when. Second, students surprised the administration by participating in a walk out to join a Black Lives Matter protest, compelling school staff to address the place of race in the school.

The school is built to change. Grade level teams, the policies and procedures committee, and high school and middle school teams are all tasked with tweaking systems and procedures and all meet on a routine basis. These systems changes were not motivated by consistency. Yet, as they changed, they undermined staff's ability to know what rules applied when. In the following field note, the policy and procedures committee, made up of grade level leaders and senior administrators, discuss changes to Community Meetings:

Kim continues down the agenda, "Someone mentioned transitions to community meetings?"

A teacher begins, "So two parts: theme of silent transitions. That falls to individual teachers. The other thing is getting students out [of the meeting]. The idea is to send 6th and 8th out simultaneously using separate stair cases. We want to exit four homerooms at a time."

"It's a traffic jam" another teacher adds. The teachers discuss among themselves the potential of moving different groups of 6th and 8th graders down from the main area to the garden level without creating a big mess of people.

The director summarizes, "So one eight and one sixth grade class, then the second eight and sixth? We just have to learn how to say that [as an announcement at the end of the meeting telling who to get up when]. Two teachers have a side conversation among themselves, clarifying which classes to go when. They come up with a solution and Kim says, "We'll have to clarify that" [clear up the language].

What is most important for understanding this conversation is that the school has been doing community meetings every week in the building for almost ten years. After a decade, they are regularly tweaking even the most basic aspects of the longest running procedures in the school. The face two issues in changing the procedure. They must design a manageable system that won't send groups of sixth and eighth graders careening into one another. They also must

change the procedure in a way that's communicable so teachers and students can follow it in an orderly way.

Just before Winter break, some students walked out of school to join a Black Lives Matter protest. The walkout sparked conversations about the role of race in the school. Students told staff they felt the school was "white space" and that the mostly white teachers did not understand their experiences as black.

In a series of faculty and grade level meetings starting in January and going through June, staff discussed race and school culture. Staff discussed the role of racial bias in hiring, school discipline, and relationships with students. Staff explored their own implicit cognitive biases through conversations and by taking the Implicit Association Task for race online (www.projectimplicit.com). They gathered feedback from other schools, their board, and community organizations on what they could do to be more inclusive. They put out a survey to staff and students to elicit people's interests and hobbies to match students and staff with similar interests in the hopes that they would build relationships on them.

Throughout the second half of the year, the staff at Achievement poured a lot of time and energy into re-thinking the culture of the school through the lens of race. Ultimately, they did not change their strategic culture or disciplinary policies. Instead, the discussions represented a shift in attention away from the culture of consistency initiative. The culture that emerged, particularly over the spring, was a more race-conscious, reflective, introspective, and vulnerable one than what they had planned for their consistency initiative.

Organizations are open, complex systems and, as such, performance never happens in isolation from the rest of the organization or in a vacuum set apart from the environment. Every stage in performance is susceptible forces beyond its scope. For Achievement, the culture that

emerged was substantially different from the culture that was planned in part because of ancillary and exogenous actions taken by staff and students.

Performative Effects and Outcomes

In a performance cycle, performative effects are the mechanisms activated by the culture that emerged. In this case, two sets of mechanisms unfolded as a result of the disciplinary inconsistency which emerged. First, inconsistency gave students the means to resist discipline leading to further inconsistency or consistent leniency. Second, inconsistency eroded trust among faculty and students. The outcome however was different. Driven by the culture of consistency as a frame of reference for understanding how to control behavior, rates of punishment skyrocketed across the year.

Effects

The culture of inconsistency gave students leverage over staff. Because the school's authority system is built on consistency and everyone knows the rules, if a student responds to a demerit by saying, "so-and-so doesn't give me a demerit for that," teachers are put in a bind. They must decide whether to undermine the other teacher in order to give the demerit. Often teachers would decide to give a verbal warning rather than punish the student. Inconsistency bred inconsistency. Some students would use this to get permission to break the rules. For example, one seventh grade student managed to get one teacher to allow him to sit sideways in his chair during class, a violation of the posture rule. The student then sat sideways in two other classes, telling the teachers that the first allowed him to do it. One teacher resisted the ploy, but the other allowed it. In this way, inconsistency bred consistent leniency.

The culture of inconsistency also eroded the trust teachers had in one another and in their students. Everyone generally knows when a teacher is not enforcing the rules. The following discussion from a meeting of department chairs in April exemplifies this:

Ellie says that the substitute was talking with students in the middle school cafeteria when the students should have been going back to class. Another teacher wanted to correct the students but didn't want to undermine the substitute's authority. "The students were with an adult" is how Ellie phrased what the teacher had said. Ellie concluded saying, "There's a felt perception that she's not competent."

In this scenario, the substitute is seen to be openly breaking the rules with students by talking with them in the cafeteria area during class where anyone can see them. The point for Ellie in telling the story is to communicate how untrustworthy the substitute is to the other teachers.

More generally, trust did not erode among staff as a whole but for particular staff who were seen as not toeing the line.

The mistrust among staff was complemented by a mistrust staff developed of students. Returning to Figure 3, the spike in February and March in mentions of consistency stem almost wholly from middle school grade level meetings. In February, middle school teachers begin discussing consistency again. By March, consistency was being discussed as a systemic problem. According to notes from their March 9th meeting, the sixth grade team began implementing "resets" – halts on all classroom activity until students settle down. And on March 10th, the eighth grade team discussed consistency in terms of how to get their students invested in the class. On March 18th, the seventh grade team brainstormed ideas for how to address issues of collective misbehavior in one of their classes.

The lack of trust bubbled over for the eighth grade team in May when they discussed not going on their annual overnight field trip to visit a college. In the following field note, the grade level team is discussing ways to mitigate the dangers they see in their students:

When I come in, the room is cold and quiet. They're discussing whether to hire a security guard to monitor the hallways of the hotel during the 8th grade's overnight trip. I'm immediately struck by the gravity in the room and wait to take notes to see where the conversation is. The teachers are very hesitant about certain students who they believe could get themselves into trouble. At one point, a fourth year math teacher Danielle acknowledges, 'we've had rough classes before, but not as rough as this class.' That encapsulates the focal point of the conversation.

Scott a new art teacher says, "If the likelihood that something happens is 5 percent, then if we do this for so many years, something is going to happen. We need a plan for when it happens." Kim adds to this, "Yeah, on the Rome trip, we've had a fight, drinking, smoking. Stuff has happened and people on the team have managed it." Seeing no responses in the room, Kim asks bluntly, "Would you prefer it if it's not an overnight. Do you even want to go?" Justin says with quiet conviction, "I want to go and I think it should be overnight. The kids like it. And, it's a rite of passage and we don't have many of those as Achievement."

The director walked out of the meeting furious. The idea of hiring a security guard or cancelling the overnight trip altogether flew in the face of the warm strict idea of "assuming the best." But teachers thought the kids were particularly dangerous. So dangerous in fact that they considered cancelling what most had come to see as a rite of passage.

The performative effect of the culture of inconsistency was to create inconsistent or consistently lenient discipline and erode trust. These effects however are different from the outcomes observed by the school. For school leaders, the theory was that consistency would reduce misbehavior. The reduced misbehavior would be observable in the number of demerits, send outs, and suspensions. These numbers were ultimately the outcome of interest to the school to the extent that they presented evidence of good behavior.

Outcomes

Outcome measurement (and review) began early in the year. In fact, it was the way the consistency initiative was discussed in faculty meetings early in the year. From the beginning, the rate of discipline had skyrocketed. Here is the Dean of Student Life presenting the data at the faculty meeting in early September.

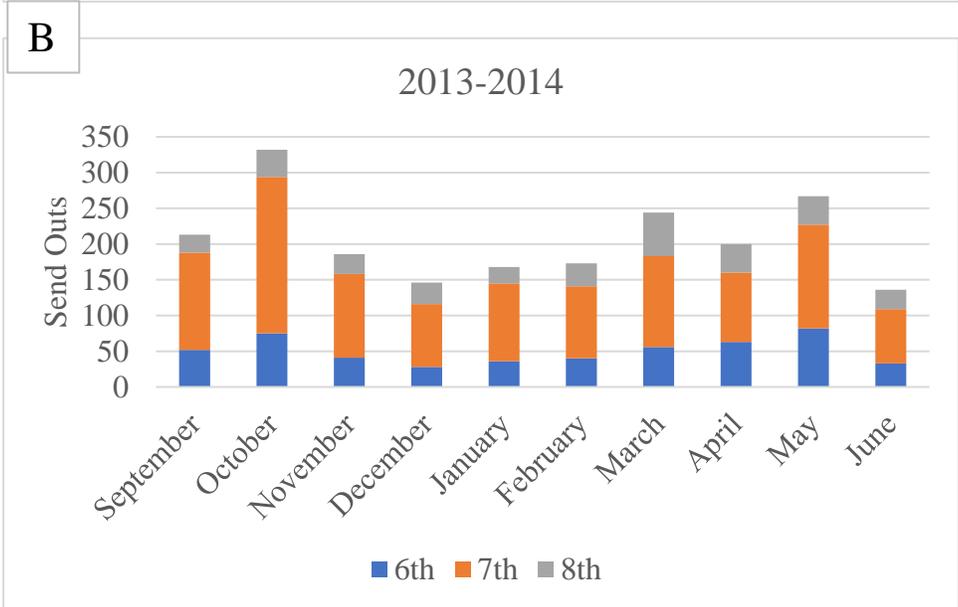
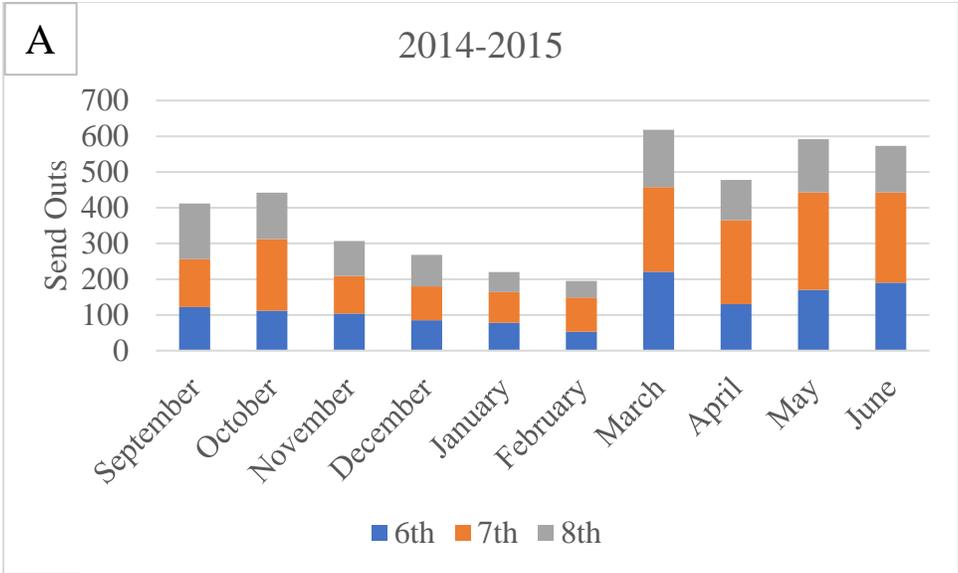
Rich began, "So, send-outs and demerits are up over last year. They're up 30 percent 663-977 (sic, 663 to 977 is fifty percent) and send-outs are up 10 percent 70-76. We're going to go into what students are getting demerits and send-outs for. It's important for us to keep in mind our goals and what we're trying to accomplish. So, categories for demerits. What you're going to see here is, areas having the highest growth in demerits. So, food is definitely one, off-task, speaking out of turn, tardy. And this is school wide."

(the teachers discuss the numbers at their table)

After teachers shared their thoughts, David said, “We definitely don’t want you to think that, because the numbers are up, that those are bad things. This is not necessarily a bad thing. We have to do this so we can correct things as the year goes on.

The rate of discipline was up at the beginning of the year, but they did not automatically interpret it as a sign of failure. Remember, their goal was reducing misbehavior, not demerits. However, the default response from staff is still that the elevated numbers are not good. That’s why David says the numbers are “not necessarily a bad thing.”

However, the numbers remained elevated throughout the year, especially for middle school. Figure 4 compares the rate of send outs during the 2014-2015 school year for the middle school to the prior year’s send outs.



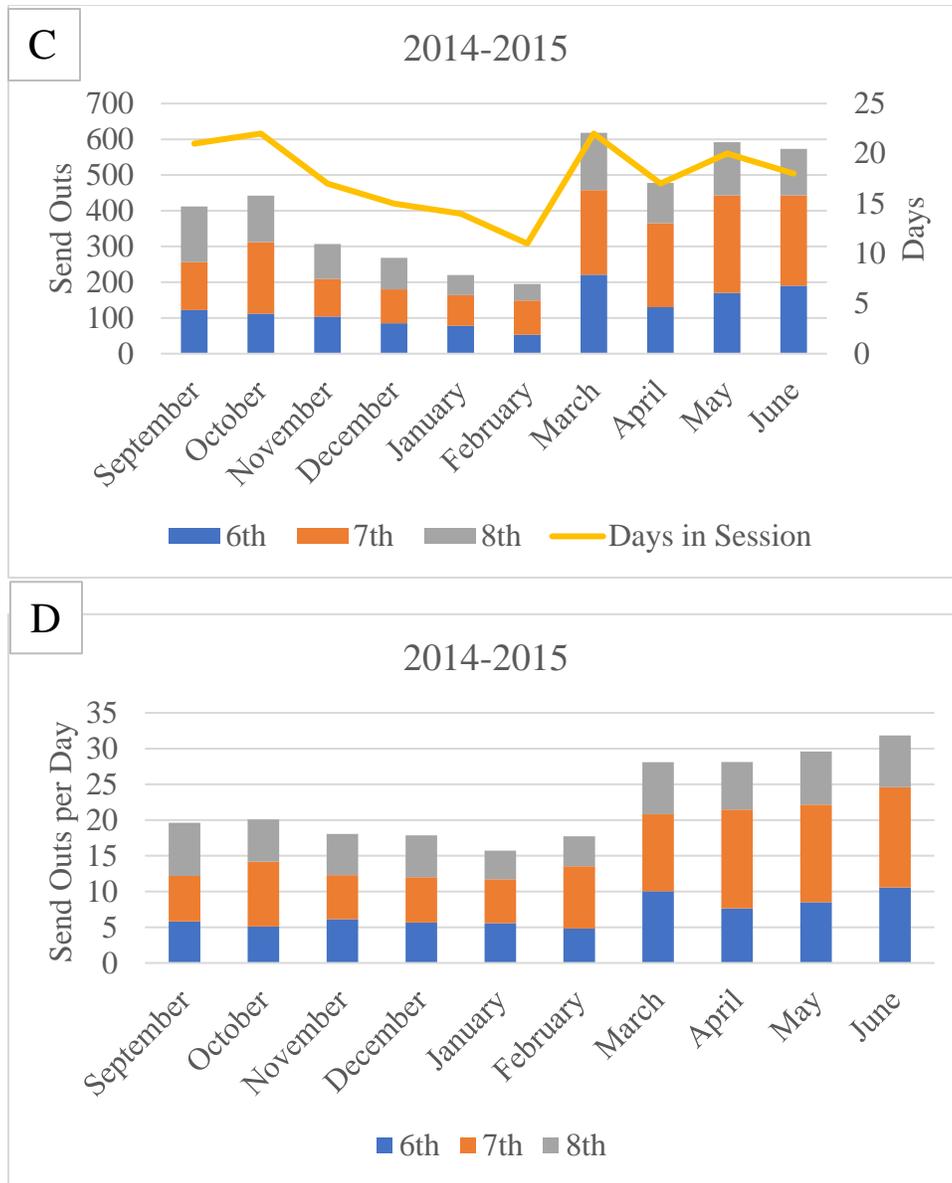


Figure 4: Distribution of send-outs in the middle school during the (A) 2014-2015 and (B) 2013-2014 school year. (C) Distribution of send-outs and the number of days in session 2014-2015 and (D) the distribution of send outs per day in the middle school during the 2014-2015 school year.

In all, the number of send outs in the middle school doubled from 2,000 in the 2013-2014 school year to 4,000 the following year. Only the seventh grade saw a year-over-year rate of

growth that was less than double. Sixth grade saw an increase of 150 percent from 500 to 1250 while the increase for eighth grade was over 200 percent from 350 send outs in a year to 1100.

In Figure 4D, I plot the send outs with the percentage of days the school was in session. The send outs per day shows that the decrease from October through February can be modeled by the days in session. It also throws into relief how extreme the increase in March was. There were fifty percent more send outs in March than October despite their having the same number of days in session. Similarly, the number of send outs in April was two thirds higher than in November even though both had 17 days of class. Seasonality substantially affects the number of send outs across the year, but it does not determine the underlying *rate* of send outs.

The disciplinary data reveal three changes occurring during the 2014-2015 school year. The first was an increase in discipline across the entire 2014-2015 year as compared to the previous year. The second was a doubling of discipline in September 2014 compared to September 2013. The third was a disciplinary phase transition in the middle school in March 2014.

Only one thing changed year over year that also changed in September 2014 and then again in March for the middle school was faculty using consistency to understand discipline. As a frame for understanding how to discipline students, “consistency” encouraged faculty to see culture through the lens of punishment: am I punishing everyone the same? For all the potential challenges created during the performance – navigating discretion and consistency, communicating consistency, the loss of trust and consistent leniency; the best predictor of discipline is staff using the consistency frame to diagnose problems with classroom culture.

Narrating Change through Review Cycles

As soon as the year started and outcomes became observable, the school began to review them. They reviewed disciplinary data at the beginning of the year, again in spring, and finally

during a series of meetings at the end of the academic year. During each review, they created narratives of what happened and planned tweaks to the strategy to carry out. Each review thus represented the end of a performance sub-cycle while the end-of-year review ended the root cycle under study here.

Data reviews for all outcomes were so common that there was a pre-defined agenda for them. School leaders gave staff graphs, tables, and charts, staff discussed the data in small groups, and then collectively discussed solutions. These conversations were framed by two scripted questions for staff to answer: “what does the data tell you?” and “What are the implications for the school?” This sequence was a standard operating procedure. This routinization of review likely makes Achievement different from many other cases of performance.

Review began with teachers interpreting the data and offering explanations in light of their own experiences and beliefs. At the data review meeting in September, some teachers theorized that perhaps the elevated rates of discipline were due to students who started the year late. Another suggested it may be because there were more students in the school that year. During the data review in May when discipline continued to be high, teachers offered different theories. One said the dean’s office wasn’t a punishment anymore, students were acting out to go to the dean’s office. Another suggested that it may be that they had more first year teachers. Another suggested there weren’t enough adults monitoring students.

By design, these interpretations were followed by change recommendations. In September, the ninth grade team thought they were being too lenient and decided to discipline students more rigidly. To prevent tardy demerits, the tenth grade team suggested letting students out on time so they have time to get to their next class. The twelfth suggested they focus on

demerits like tardiness which would hurt students most in college. In May, teachers suggest “creating a culture of responsibility,” having formal conversations with students to prepare them for the next grade, and making classes more engaging.

The number of interpretations and ideas increase as the year concludes with the annual end-of-year review. All grade level teams and departments participated in a meeting to discuss the things they should start, stop, and change and a meeting on whether they met their annual goals. Grade level teams had an additional meeting to discuss what behaviors and skills students should have before entering their grade level and what they have when leaving their grade level. Finally, teachers were put into teams of diverse tenure, department, and grade to answer the same stop, start, change questions for five areas: curriculum, student culture, staff culture, college, and school operations.

The reviews in September, May, and June represent performance sub-cycles. Across these sub-cycles, staff filtered, synthesized, and forgot the many interpretations and tweaks into narratives of “what happened.” These narratives informed the plethora of changes to the school’s systems during the year and to changes in strategy from one year to the next. This is one “what happened” narrative from one senior administrator given in an interview at the beginning of the next school year.

For students, I think the culture has shifted just because we have more stuff for students to do. So that creates its own shifts. That’s both clubs, athletics, academics. I think we’re seeing increased pushback on our systems and I’m wondering if the pendulum is swinging a little. My understanding, when the school started it was like, boom-boom, very rigid, very this this this. They would get into like battles with kids and kids would leave over the *extreme* nature of some of the rules. I think we’ve swung over to a place in the middle where people are have an understanding of it, getting it, kind of bought into it, and now we’re starting to see more pushback on some of those rules and systems which is impacting culture.

This narrative sets experiences in the 2014-2015 school year in the context of larger-scale narratives from prior years in which the school is trying to engage students rather than control

them. This administrator's broad diagnosis is that, now that students have learned the warm strict system they are starting to resist it. The phrase this administrator uses which many others use is the notion of the school swinging away from its strictness. Many staff look at the school's strategy as a pendulum that has swung too far towards leniency.

Given the plethora of suggestions and failure to curb misbehavior, how did the school change its strategy at the end of the year? First, the school's leaders doubled down on culture in general and warm strict culture specifically as a focus for the school. For example, the amount of time they devoted to culture during new teacher orientation grew from three and a half hours in 2014 to *eleven and half hours* in 2015 (it was only an hour in 2009).

Second, a new initiative was undertaken in 2015 to "create a culture of opting in." This performative initiative focused on creating warm strict culture by getting students to engage in class as a means for achieving academic and behavioral goals. Despite the new initiative, they actually stuck with the structures established for the consistency initiative – discussing consistency in meetings early in the year and then moving on. They just didn't talk about it as the "theme" for the year as one teacher put it.

Finally, they continued to make substantial changes to the most basic systems and procedures. For example, the time set aside for the ethics curriculum in middle school, a cornerstone of the school's mission since its founding, was moved from homeroom to lunch. These changes were proffered with the caveat that teachers should only change them rarely so everyone can stay consistent.

Given the poor results and so much review, why did the school not abandon its theory? I believe it is because faculty narratives were fundamentally conservative in several ways. First, staff resisted attributing causes to students' behavior. As one administrator said in an interview,

“There was something about the egregious behavior [in the middle school]. It wasn’t shut down by other students as much as it had been in the past. I’m unclear as to why that was and [we’re] really trying to be mindful about some changes to make that not occur.” Having observed the system for a year does not necessarily mean that staff believed they understood it. Many were unwilling to make direct claims to know why things happened.

Second, these narratives are also trapped in time. Many things happened in the 2014-2015 school year that will never happen again. Due to miscommunication, they did not have a dean of students (who would report to the Dean of Student Life) for the first month of school. An unseasonably snowy winter led to an unprecedented number of school closures in January and February. The highly publicized shooting of black men and women by police officers across the country traumatized students. In evaluating the consistency initiative, staff recognized they only had one year’s worth of data on which to evaluate the initiative.

If such gross failure during a given year does not change the strategic culture, what does? Looking to the school’s history, the change to warm strict itself represented a substantial change in their strategic culture away from the classic No Excuses model of harsh and strict discipline. The school began making the shift away from harsh and strict punishment when they hired a new executive director in 2012. Archival documents and conversations about this transition with staff who were around for it indicate that the prior director was directly involved in finding the new director and himself wanted to make the change away from harsh and strict punishment. The will to make the strategy change was there. Hiring a new director was a way of further encouraging the change. This suggests that what led to that shift in strategic culture was a performance super-cycle with a longer time horizon and broader scope. Thus, what can be changed at the end of a cycle is relative to the scope of the cycle itself.

Discussion

Performativity theory helps us understand how our work influences the lives and fortunes of those we study. One hopes that by better theorizing performativity and studying its cases, we can develop successful theories with positive effects. At the beginning of this paper, I offered a set of practical questions about science-driven practice. Using the case and model, I believe we can answer them.

What counts as a valid implementation? Austin gives us one standard for validity: felicity (Austin 1975). In his example of a wedding ceremony, the performer must be serious in their officiating. That is, they must be acting in good faith. The staff at Achievement are acting in good faith because they believed the culture of consistency initiative would lead to warm strict culture and reduce misbehavior. This case reveals a second standard: fidelity. Fidelity means that the behavior fit with the intentions and plans set out by the systems of practice. In this case, some fidelity was lost because the initiative was discussed in inconsistent ways in orientation, grade level meetings, and department meetings. While felicity is a matter of acting in good faith, fidelity is a matter of actions matching intent. Achievement is a moderately valid case of warm strict culture because of its infidelity.

How do organizations know if they succeeded? Success is evaluated endogenously by outcomes. The school already had measures set up to evaluate their success on a range of outcomes. For this particular initiative, disciplinary data was the barometer of success. They believed they failed because the numbers were high.

The problem for all organizations is that success is often independent of what actually happened. Success is based on whether the measured outcome met or exceeded our expectations. Performance, on the other hand, is the extent to which the organization actually created that success. I argue that the elevated disciplinary numbers were driven by the culture of consistency

initiative itself. Thus, not only were they unsuccessful, but because using their strategy led to their failure, they counterperformed.

If the solution fails, how do organizations adapt? Like success, accounts of success and failure are endogenous. In this case, teachers had no clear answer for why rates of discipline were up. At the end of the year, there was only a collection of narratives of what happened and what might have happened. No one refereed the many claims in the many narratives. There was no great theoretical debate over whether warm strict or No Excuses were accurate theories. The school staff simply used their narratives to make change in their teams. In this case, the process of learning from failure was practical (i.e. what can we do differently to establish warm strict culture) not theoretical (e.g. when does warm strict work?). These practical narratives discussed by those in power in a particular group propelled the school's strategy forward.

When do organizations change their theory? Despite the clear failure, there was no crisis of theory. The primary reason is that different theories are tested on different time scales and different places. During my focal year, only a small slice of warm strict theory was at stake, namely that pushing consistency early would entrench warm strict culture in classrooms. At the end of the year, this slice of theory *was* changed. I expect that, if rates of discipline remain high for many more years, warm strict too would eventually be abandoned. Perhaps, on a long enough time scale with continuous failures to perform, the school would abandon the No Excuses model altogether.

Conclusion

Organizational culture is a performative concept. Managers, directors, boards, and shareholders clamor to shape the culture of the organization because research shows good culture, however it is defined, will lead to higher returns. Thus, organizational culture can no longer be studied in

isolation from its scientific context. Culture no longer just emerges from people working together, but is a product of researchers and advocates who tie systems of beliefs, values, and norms to performance and executives who create systems to ensure that members hold them as their own. This has three implications for the study of organizational culture.

First, not all cultures are the same. Instead they are packaged and proffered in configurations of various complexity and coherence. On one end of the spectrum, the No Excuses model has a very elaborate culture where its component beliefs, values, and norms are tightly connected into a complex theory of action. On the other, the culture proffered by the popular management press valorizes a repertoire of values like entrepreneurship, innovation, and scrappiness and stigmatizes values like risk aversion, formality, and control (Weeks 2004: 41). To study organizational culture, we should examine what configurations exist and how configurations affect organizations. Are complex but coherent configurations more likely to diffuse than simple but loose configurations? How does the complexity or coherence affect implementation? Do organizations with loosely configured cultures have more loosely coupled review cycles?

Second, culture is always an input and an output. Stated in my terms, organizational culture is always partly emergent and partly strategic, some combination of who staff want to be and beliefs they are and the values, beliefs, and norms they manage to realize every day. Researchers need to better understand the mechanisms at the interface between strategic and emergent culture. In this study, the school retained its normal structures of practice for staff. Perhaps emergent culture is controlled by the fit between systems of practices and strategy, such that misfits lead to disaster. Another corollary is that, since the review stage always occurs after

culture emerges; changes to strategic culture reflect the emergent culture. Perhaps a corrosion in emergent culture could corrode the strategic culture, creating a vicious cycle.

Lastly, our research on culture has direct effects on the performance of our organizations and markets and the everyday lives of workers. It is incumbent upon us that we design, interpret, and publish research with this in mind. Most importantly, if we contribute to the culture organizations ultimately adopt, we need to understand what features of culture we *should* be studying? Our values have largely been implicit with the exception of research on diversity and corporate social responsibility and the field of critical management. In this paper, the important question has been whether culture strategy met its goals and whether the emergent culture fit with the strategic culture. The explicit value here is that it is important to understand how research on culture is translated into action that benefits society. But there are other equally important questions. For example, we should study what determines the rigidity of emergent cultures. When are they robust or fragile? When are they flexible? We should also understand the limits on emergent culture? When does culture become hegemonic and when do people simply “go along?”

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