Foreword

Social Capital and the Educator

With the production of *Making Sense of Social Networks in Schools*, the authors have done a great service by bringing together into one book two heretofore separate and unconnected worlds—the day-to-day real-world struggles of educators in schools and some of the most fundamentally useful research on educational organizational behavior to come along in quite awhile. If you have any familiarity with the way in which adults behave in schools—or for that matter, how they behave in any organization—you will find this book to be quite revealing. It reads like a real life drama, with its extreme attention to the evolving interpersonal dynamics of its characters; however, what you are left with is vastly more—a basic understanding of social network analysis and, more important, an unforgettable view of how schools function as social networks and what that means for you.

Each of these worlds—schools and social network analysis—is complex by itself. Consider social network analysis—a distinctive blend of conceptual construct and method, located deep within the vast, complex universe of the social and behavioral sciences.[1] SNA differs in several ways from other social science constructs and methods, especially from the ones

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1. For one of the most comprehensive and inclusive treatments of social network analysis, see the most recent edition of Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust, *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

that educators are most familiar with. The "unit of analysis" is not an individual (think "student" or "teacher") or even a group of individuals (think "all students or teachers in one school"), but a group of individuals and the linkages among them. Individuals are considered to be interdependent: They are not autonomous entities behaving independently from each other. Individuals are linked to some (but not all) other individuals in the group. Those linkages serve as pathways over which travel material or nonmaterial resources, in this instance mostly "social capital"—affirmation, information, affection, knowledge, status, advice, permission, access and the like.

All of those linkages among individuals in the group—the network—form a structure which provides various forms of opportunities and constraints for those individuals. The networks themselves can represent different structures—social, political, economic, et cetera, depending on the content of the linkages. Structures represent relatively enduring patterns of relationships among the individuals. These SNA building blocks require their own procedures for calculation and portrayal—their own methods.

The methods to analyze social networks have evolved over half a century, drawn from three distinct mathematical traditions: graph theory, statistical and probability theory, and algebraic models. Aided greatly by recent advances in computing technology, the computational challenges inherent in SNA constructs can now be easily relegated to a laptop computer. Consequently, a growing number of organizational analysts have ready access to a computationally complex array of concepts that capture new understandings about a social enterprise—including those about individuals, like "isolates" and "stars," about relational ties among individuals, like friendship and frequency of contact, and about networks, like "density." (These are only a few of the many constructs that are used to portray school life in the book.)

Just as the computer has wrung out the computational hard work of social network analysis, leaving the potentially rich conceptual findings, the authors of *Making Sense* have

labored successfully to bring the abstractions of SNA into the real world of schools in a fully engaging and accessible manner. Just like the way viewers relate to the actors in the most popular soap operas, we readers understand and can intimately relate to the educators in *Making Sense*. Indeed, you will not be able to resist identifying with some of them—and hating others. Follow the adventures of Stephanie (new principal and naïve protagonist) as she engages the world of Garvey Middle School, including Bill (politically powerful custodian and grounds keeper), Abigail (secretary and gatekeeper), Diane and Pedro (teachers and seemingly early allies to Stephanie), and many others as they "educate" the children of Garvey Middle School. ("Educate" here is analogous to saying the actors on *General Hospital* "provide health care.")

But unlike soap operas on TV, the authors don't leave you as the passive viewer, stuck with emotional engagement, ad hominum reactions, and with no coherent conceptual framework to guide participation in the action, let alone affect the outcomes in a desirable manner. *Making Sense* is a book about school leadership, complete with frameworks, analysis, illustrations, and recommendations. Its primary intent and value lie in its ability to make transparent that which is usually quite opaque, but very real and consequential for organizations— informal networks and their impact on the formal organization.

The authors' secondary intent is perhaps just as valuable— to allude to the vast array of topics which can fruitfully be (and have been) framed as social networks. The topics themselves vary greatly, but are not new—for example, belief systems, the spread of HIV, economic systems, consensus, social influence, high tech innovation, venture capital formation. With SNA, however, many analysts have found great value reframing these and many other topics as patterned relationships among people, or networks. The topics are not new, but SNA has provided educators and others with a potentially more productive way to study and to understand both enduring and emerging issues.

Just as educators rely on basic statistical tools in their analysis of test scores, the authors have made a compelling case for using social network analysis as a useful, perhaps even necessary, tool to inform other parts of their work. Most of us have a firm but superficial understanding about "informal organizations" and "social networks" and even "multiple, overlapping friendship groups." That superficial understanding also helps us understand some individual behavior ("birds of a feather flock together"). We also usually acknowledge the instrumental value of informal relationships ("It's not what you know, but who you know"). What most of us are not so familiar with are the advances in social network analysis over the last half century and how those perspectives can be applied to our understanding of school leadership. *Making Sense* remedies this in a way that, over time, should foster the application of social network analysis to many educational issues, and, more directly, to improve the quality of leadership in our educational organizations.

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