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Future Directions: An Alternate Organizational Lens on Middle-of-the-Road Education Reforms

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Abstract

This essay response critically examines and expands on the arguments put forth by the authors of "Navigating Middle-of-the-Road Reforms through Collaborative Community." Using organizational theory, the paper clarifies questions about the theoretical construct of collaborative community and middle-of-the-road reforms. It concludes by offering two paths for further study that focus on exploring the various levels of democratizing influence enacted by the policy tensions the authors described and by suggesting a closer examination of the resulting organizational responses.

This article is in response to

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THE DEMOCRATIC STATE has always struggled with a key issue: balancing centralized, top-down mandates that provide the advantage of systematizing and standardizing to maximize efficiency and accountability with decentralized bottom-up decision-making that capitalizes on the local knowledge necessary for effective implementation at the ground level (Scott, 1998). Recently, though, these competing forces, which the authors of the paper (Bingham & Burch, 2017) characterized as market-based, neoliberal "instrumental-rational" tendencies (e.g., "ends justify the means" kind of standardization) and "democratic engagement" proclivities (e.g., shared, inclusive local control), are further complicated by being packaged together in education reforms, such as through the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)—federal and state education policies that encapsulate both instrumental-rational and democratic engagement elements in *one* reform strategy.

This enduring conflict, salient within and across numerous education policies, is precisely the central issue that the authors address. By effectively calling attention to the complexity of the institutional context and these "middle-of-the-road" policies, the authors have urged us to take notice of how practitioners grapple with these tensions. Looking primarily at how teachers at a charter school site navigate decisions about classroom practices under this reform climate, the authors (Bingham & Burch, 2017) noted how teachers face pressure to standardize instruction while simultaneously being expected to personalize learning for each individual student. In doing so, the authors

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challenged readers to recognize alternative ways of thinking about how teachers might deal with the competing conflicts in the broader policy context. The authors tentatively explored the construct of "collaborative communities" as a possible organizational practice that might enable schools to incorporate and address the competing elements of instrumental-rationality and democratic engagement typical of middle-of-the-road reforms.

Considering collaborative community as an organizational approach that may effectively balance efficiency, accountability, democracy, and innovation is an exciting proposition. It implies that schools do not have to pick one organizational approach over another—they can choose a hybrid option. Indeed, researchers of public management have already explored a similar concept of collaboration in the name of policy innovation (Ansell & Torfing, 2014). Empirical research on the efficacy of collaborative communities, however, is limited to correlational survey research or exploratory, anecdotal evidence with no causal studies demonstrating direct effects on potential outcomes of interest (Adler, Heckscher, McCarthy, & Rubinstein, 2015; Agger & Sørensen, 2014). Therefore, critiquing the efficacy of the collaborative community model itself at this stage seems preemptive. Rather than hypothetically debating the efficacy of the model and taking a stance on collaborative communities, I suggest that further theoretical and empirical examination is necessary to extend our understanding and classification of middle-of-the-road reforms and organizational responses to this policy context, which may or may not always include the emergence of collaborative communities.

The authors' (Bingham & Burch, 2017) primary contribution has been to identify this important policy trend, and we should care about it not just because we want to know more about how schools interpret and make sense of these mixed messages in ways that may lead to the democratizing of instructional practices but because delving deeper will allow us to understand how schools are perhaps acting as broader sites of social action and change in response to a conflicting institutional environment. In other words, there is a potentially larger impact not just to democratizing classroom instruction but to democratizing the governance structure and organizational learning processes of the educational system as a whole. A shift to middle-of-the-road education policies may signal greater trends in organizational forms and practices in the world of education policy that are geared toward hybrid approaches that encapsulate the best of instrumental-rational and democratic engagement tendencies.

The authors (Bingham & Burch, 2017) presented a topic worthy of further theoretical development and empirical research. Thus, in this essay response, I use organizational theory to raise additional questions that strengthen our understanding of the claims being made by the authors with regard to their characterization of the collaborative community construct and middle-of-the-road reforms. Furthermore, I offer two possible paths via which to expand this conversation: first, I urge us to further examine the various levels of democratizing influence

that a middle-of-the-road reform may introduce to the education system; second, I suggest a closer exploration of the relationship between the policy tensions and the array of possible organizational responses, which extend beyond collaborative community practices that may or may not lead to democratization of the school system.

Theoretical Clarification of the Collaborative Community Construct and Middle-of-the-Road Reforms

Before delving into a discussion about directions for future research, allow me to clarify the collaborative community construct and definition of middle-of-the-road reforms used by the authors (Bingham & Burch, 2017). I do not debate the constructs themselves, but I want to acknowledge the different uses and definitions of the terms. In the paper, the authors used the collaborative community construct in different contexts. Sometimes it was used to refer to organizational practices of teacher and leader collaboration, but other times the authors used it in conversation with Weberian (1978) social action ideal types: instrumental-rational, traditionalistic, affectual, and value-rational. For example, they emphasized that collaborative communities are a manifestation of the value-rational ideal type. There was a missing link in their overall discussion, though, that would amplify and strengthen the connection between these ideas and clarify the utility of the collaborative community construct.

In an organizational context, one reason we care about the Weberian ideal types of social action is that they help explain why an individual would decide to become part of an organization (e.g., a school or school district) or an organizational field (e.g., the teaching/education profession). In other words, the ideal types are useful for answering the question about why any individual would have an obligation or attachment to an organization. Organizational forms of community, therefore, are not necessarily in reference to community in a layman way—the term is instead more commonly used to reference the theoretical ties between an organizational member and an organization as well as the *type* of organizational form (e.g., hierarchical bureaucracy).

This is an important point that the authors (Bingham & Burch, 2017) frequently skipped over. Their discussion often went directly from the Weberian context to a conversation about the collaborative organizational practices without a deeper examination of the impact middle-of-the-road policies may have on the organizational field or the organizational form. A middle-of-the-road reform may be exerting institutional pressure on organizations (e.g., schools or school districts) and organizational fields (e.g., the profession of teaching) in ways that are transforming the form of the organization itself *as well as* organizational practices (which may include the emergence of collaborative communities, as the authors suggested). In other words, an organization that was typically considered an instrumental-rational bureaucracy is now implementing more value-rational aims. Or, alternatively, professions that were

typically instrumentally-rational are now shifting gears to serve multiple purposes: social action *and* efficiency (Adler et al., 2015). And perhaps due to this shift in the broader institutional environment (through middle-of-the-road policies), there are changes to the organization type as well as in organizational or professional *practices*. This is an important observation, because it signals greater changes: It's not just about the middle-of-the-road policies or the individual teacher practices but rather about the potentially widespread and systemic effect that may take place across multiple levels of education as an institution. There may be larger changes taking place in the ways schools and teachers think about their organizational or professional identities, for example.

Institutional Pressures Trickle through Organizational Levels: Getting a Grapple on Middle-of-the-Road Reforms

In their case study research of a charter school site, the authors (Bingham & Burch, 2017) took a holistic approach to examining the impact of middle-of-the-road policies on teacher practices. As a result, the discussion of the effect of the institutional context on teacher practices continually blurs the line among different levels and areas of analysis. For example, they referenced the simultaneous democratization and standardization of classroom practices (e.g., through personalized learning and a curricular emphasis on civic duty that is also anchored in weekly data sessions and notions of replicability), but sometimes they also alluded to changes in the organizational learning processes at the school (e.g., collaboration between teachers and administrators). Admittedly, this holistic approach is useful for initial exploration on the emergence of an organizational response, and the authors were explicitly interested in examining teacher practices. But future research should focus on clarifying how and to what extent middle-of-the-road policies and conflicting institutional pressures affect varying levels of the internal organizational environment.

Presumably, the tension between top-down and bottom-up or instrumental-rational and value-rational policy mandates is not limited to issues that affect classroom instruction or organizational learning. Instead, these tensions might percolate through all levels of an organizational system. A sharper focus on the ways that middle-of-the-road policies impact organizations at varying levels would provide greater clarity about the effect of these tensions (see Table 1). Is it the case that middle-of-the-road policies primarily serve to democratize and standardize instruction? Or can middle-of-the-road policies also affect the democratization and standardization of organizational learning and school governance structures in relevant and similar ways? This is an important point given that the tension in middle-of-the-road policies might not always elicit an organizational response that results in collaborative communities, as the authors speculated with regard to the realm of instructional practices. Instead, the tension might affect organizational learning or governance in ways that differ based on the policy structure or the specific organizational context. For example, a policy like the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) may result in decentralization of governance decisions, with school districts soliciting more parent and community input—but it may not result in democratic instructional practices. It may also be the case that one policy simultaneously affects multiple levels within the organization, which is implied but not explicitly stated by the authors. Examining additional policy settings with middle-of-the-road reforms would also allow for further study of how competing tensions between standardization and democratic engagement have the potential to affect school district governance or organizational learning as opposed to only impacting classroom practices.

Conversely, the idea of organizational levels could also be applied to studying the external organizational environment. Where exactly are these competing institutional pressures coming from? The authors (Bingham & Burch, 2017) pointed to layers of policy initiatives, such as the "neoliberal" Race to The Top (RTTP) as well as the more middle-of-the-road CCSS and charter school movements, that influence the institutional environment these schools are operating in. But this is just the macro level of influence that may only be capturing broad fads and fashions in education reform (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). There may be further room for exploration in meso levels of influence emerging from organizational fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). As the authors briefly pointed out, related ideas about collaborative learning through "communities of practice" (Adler et al., 2015), "professional learning communities" (DuFour, 2004), or "instructional rounds" (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009) have been circulating in the education field for a while. The authors expressed concern that the concept of collaborative communities may overlap with these prior trends, but I view it less as a redundancy and more as an opportunity to examine a different level of institutional influence.

Transformations or shifts in teacher and leadership training may account for a rise in collaborative communities within schools regardless of the policy tensions. Or, more importantly and interestingly, teacher training and professionalization could be a place where collaborative communities become a stronger part of the teacher and educator identity. Adler et al. (2015) themselves used the concept of collaborative communities in the context of professionalization. They noted that collaborative communities represent a new form of relationship building between the organization and organizational members—teachers may now be entering the profession with "higher social purpose goals" as opposed to only focusing on the intrinsic rewards of the profession. Therefore, it seems like a missed opportunity to not also examine how shifts in the professionalization of teachers and education leaders (and their resulting thoughts about their obligations and professional identities) tie into the hybrid organizational practices and policies the authors observed through their case study research.

Table 1. Varying organizational levels potentially affected by middle-of-the-road policies

Internal Organizational Context	External Organizational Context
Classroom Practices This level of analysis refers to approaches that simultaneously democratize and standardize instructional practices. These approaches might be focused on implementing specific pedagogical or content-based democratic aims in the classroom (e.g., student-centered learning, civic education, student empowerment, etc.).	**Macro Level: Federal & State Education Policies** This level of analysis refers to federal and state education policies, such as Common Core State Standards (CCSS), Race to the Top (RTTT), or Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), that set the broader policy context schools operate in.
Organizational Learning This level of analysis refers to approaches that simultaneously democratize and standardize organizational learning where the intent might be to share and distribute teacher and administrator knowledge through more collaborative and open channels (e.g., communities of practice, professional learning communities, etc.).	**Meso Level: Professionalization of Teachers & Leaders** This level of analysis refers to the practices adopted and taught by the profession (e.g., teacher or leader groups that interact frequently with one another to share best practices that may advocate for collaborative communities or related practices).
School Governance This level of analysis refers to approaches that simultaneously democratize and standardize school governance structures by encouraging schools or school districts to gather and incorporate community and teacher input, establish shared decision-making practices.	**Micro Level: School Site Initiatives** This level of analysis refers to emergent ideas and trends that occur from innovative school sites and spread through school networks.

My point in emphasizing a stricter definition of the varying levels of influence is not meant to encourage researchers to study the effects of the policy tensions in isolation, but rather my intent is to raise our awareness about the ways that middle-of-the-road reforms may be operating at different levels of the internal and external organizational context. Designing research that is more explicitly aware of these levels may enable us to gain a deeper understanding of the different types of middle-of-the-road reforms so as to expand the definition beyond what the authors (Bingham & Burch, 2017) have considered in the paper and also to consider the myriad of ways that these kinds of policies may impact elements of the organizational environment. It may be the case that organizational learning or school governance responds in different ways to tension—we may discover that democratizing and standardizing governance proves to be more difficult than a hybrid approach to instructional practices that simultaneously standardizes and democratizes educational practices. Or it may prove impossible to separate the systemwide impact of a middle-of-the-road reform. Either way, if we are to get a handle on the impact of these policy tensions on the school, we need to make an effort to disentangle some of these differences.

Tension versus Uncertainty in the Institutional Environment and the Resulting Hybrid Organizational Responses

An interesting element of the authors' (Bingham & Burch, 2017) argument is that they considered the tensions in the broader institutional context to function as catalysts for the emergence of collaborative communities among teachers and school administrators. On this finding, I have two primary comments. First, framing the conflict as a tension rather than as an uncertainty is an interpretation that signals a parting from ways in which this type of friction has typically been characterized. Research on organizations, for example, suggests that a typical organizational response to conflicts and uncertainty in the institutional environment may be decoupling: a school district may ceremoniously adopt a state mandate (Meyer & Rowan, 1977)—meaning that a school simply interprets a new education reform as a fleeting trend that does not necessarily need to be implemented. While decoupling may still occur in this middle-of-the-road policy context, I think the authors have identified a different kind of institutional environment and organizational response that has closer parallels to organizational studies of firms and businesses simultaneously pursuing dual organizational purposes, such as financial and social goals (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). I encourage researchers to spend some time fleshing out some of the conceptual differences between uncertainty and tension in the institutional context. How are these concepts different? What does it matter whether schools face uncertainty, tension, or both?

Second, ideas about democratic organizations and organizational tensions are not new, but the authors capture tensions in the policy context that may give rise to different collaborative organizational responses that are not captured by existing theories about how organizations deal with conflict. Organizational studies that examine the so-called democratization of the organization, for example, attribute shifts in organizational practices to a changing institutional environment that is characterized by a knowledge-based economy in which complex, nonroutine tasks are no longer solved by a bureaucratic organizational form (Adler, 2001; Adler, Kwon, & Heckscher, 2008). Meanwhile, others focus on how hierarchies and markets have become delegitimized organizational forms due to a variety of cultural and economic forces, which have in turn given rise to new decentralization practices that are perhaps more democratic (Fuller, 2015). These explanations may or may not be transferable to the education sphere, though; educational instruction has always been a knowledge-based industry, and in eras before No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the act of teaching functioned as a nonroutine, nonstandardized task. Therefore, the authors (Bingham & Burch, 2017) were tapping into something potentially unique about the shifts in education policy. On the other hand, Duncan (1976) and others have previously written about firm tensions in the organizational objectives, but they have done so from a nondemocratic angle (e.g., how to spark innovation but continue to invest in what works). The authors of this paper focused on democratic tensions that highlight how a bureaucratic organizational form that was already supposed to care about prosocial elements (e.g., well-being of students, community

engagement) is now integrating the tensions by mixing value-rational and instrumental-rational aims.

The authors (Bingham & Burch, 2017) did not make the direct claim that policy tensions automatically give rise to collaborative communities among teachers. Nevertheless, it is worth considering this claim and exploring alternative hybrid responses to such policy tensions. One question to ask is whether collaborative communities are a result of the tensions or whether they are a survival mechanism for the existing policy context. In all likelihood, collaborative communities are only one of many organizational responses. Deliberative democratic forms of participation, for example, have been identified as an appropriate response in some communities where there is conflict and tension (Fung, 2001)—this approach may prove to be equally as good at addressing a conflicting policy context. Alternatively, decoupling may emerge as an appropriate response to the policy tensions. In considering alternative organizational responses, though, we should also consider the trade-offs offered by each: What would a deliberative democracy approach give us that a collaborative community would not? Why would a school take on a collaborative community approach rather than decoupling or deliberative democracy? These questions will force us to identify some of the characteristics that give rise to differing responses across school contexts in ways that advance our thinking about the impact of middle-of-the-road polices.

Conclusion

I highly value the authors' (Bingham & Burch, 2017) recognition of this complex policy environment, and I appreciate their venturing into the organizational sphere to bridge multiple literatures together. They have captured an emerging trend in education that has parallels in multiple fields and that raises questions about how schools and practitioners respond to competing institutional pressures. By highlighting how collaborative communities allow for both standardization and democratization of classroom practices in ways that may result in a potentially more democratic education, the authors have provoked us to consider hybrid organizational responses that break away from dichotomous conceptualizations of school responses to tensions in the policy context.

In this essay response, I argue for greater clarity of the conceptual constructs used by the authors; furthermore, I put forth a level of analysis framework to examine the potential expansion and differential effects across organizational systems of the middle-of-the-road reforms. I think the policy trend may simultaneously democratize and standardize educational practices with regard to organizational practices (e.g., collaborative communities), organizational form (e.g., from bureaucratic to value-rational structures), organizational governance (e.g., decentralized decision-making, incorporating community input, etc.), and organizational fields (e.g., teacher and school leader identities). Furthermore, I hope that researchers will work to examine additional elements of this trend across different policy contexts and to consider the theoretical mechanisms that give rise to collaborative communities as opposed to deliberative democratic practices or decoupling.

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