

Analysis Phantom Policies as a Management Tool

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Abstract: Phantom policies are policies, programs, or initiatives that fail to address successfully the issues they were created to solve. Phantom policies are policies that have some effect, however, not in the ways intended, or not to the extent that the policymakers intended. This paper will discuss the phantom policy as a management tool. The study will be focused on how organizations and governments can employ symbolic policy instruments to mollify various stakeholding groups, as well as managing political, social, and administrative challenges. It is argued that phantom policy as a management tool exists in between effective policy and no policy at all. The study will examine the ways in which the vagueness, ambiguity, and limited scope of policies can be used by policymakers and administrators to mask the lack of significant action and attempt to achieve policy effectiveness at the same time. The potential benefits, as well as the costs, of phantom policies will be discussed. In particular, it will be argued that such policies might create leeway for political wrangling, however, they can also undermine the trust of the public, as well as overall administrative effectiveness. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the ways in which phantom policies contribute to, as well as impede upon contemporary governance and policy analysis. By providing a theoretical background of phantom policy, this study will contribute to a better understanding of the processes of public policy formulation and implementation, and how these processes can be improved.

Keywords: Phantom policy; public policy; policy implementation; symbolic governance; management tools; governance; institutional behavior; policy ambiguity; administrative management; public trust; accountability; policy outcomes.

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Introduction

Background of the Study

Schools are sophisticated institutions where the conduct of teachers is influenced not only by formal policy and regulation but also by informal expectations, routines, and traditions. Principals have the formal authority to establish procedures, assign responsibilities, assess performance, and enforce organizational rules. However, in practice, a number of expectations related to teachers' behavior may exist, which are not directly stated in official policies or administrative documents. Moreover, teachers frequently develop the perception that such practices are mandatory, because they are often reinforced through communication or are presented as a part of the organizational tradition. Thus, some schools may contain unverified informal practices, which seem to have the status of official policies. Such expectations may be labelled 'phantom policies'. The purpose of this study is to discuss the concept of phantom policies and analyze the process by which such regulations emerge in organizations.

The existence of phantom policies suggests several issues related to power and authority in schools. Teachers comply with phantom policies because they believe that the principal formally instituted them, due to the support of other teachers, or out of fear of

reprisals. Informal policy may arise when a particular practice is performed consistently by teachers, even if its initial introduction was ambiguous or uncertain. Phantom policies may be established based on various circumstances, such as a misunderstanding, adherence to tradition, or subjective assessment of the situation. The existence of such policies allows more flexible management of the staff, which, in turn, contributes to achieving positive results. A principal may discover an existing phantom policy through observations, communication with teachers, or adherence to organizational traditions. Subsequently, this information may be used to further strengthen the already existing informal policy, which has the force of an official one. Notably, the principal does not formally appoint such a rule; rather, the uncertainty regarding its existence is sufficient for teachers to believe in its existence and to adjust their behavior accordingly.

This phenomenon deserves further discussion, because it helps explain how organizational control can be exercised effectively, despite the relative informality of the instructions. Phantom policies demonstrate how the management of employees can take place outside the framework of existing policies, relying on unproven and ambiguous facts. At the same time, phantom policies can have negative consequences for the staff, as they can cause confusion, subjective restrictions, and mistrust. Additionally, the lack of clarity regarding the status of such regulations can lead to

excessive caution on the part of employees. If they suspect that a particular action falls under the category of the phantom policies, they will seek to avoid it, because otherwise, their work and intentions may be questioned by the authorities. Finally, phantom policies can diminish the professional independence of teachers and cause anxiety and mistrust among employees.

A considerable amount of research has been done on educational leadership, organizational culture, informal rules, and managerial power. However, the way in which the phenomenon of phantom policies manifests itself in schools may not have received enough attention. Therefore, the description of the way in which phantom policies emerge, as well as their influence on the teachers' behavior, will allow a better understanding of the dynamics of the power in schools. The current study will be conducted to determine the ways in which phantom policies affect the staff and how they are used by principals to exercise their managerial functions.

Problem Statement

School management is characterized by a number of difficulties, which stem from the necessity for the principal to influence the teachers' behavior and organize the work of the institution. In general, the influence on the teachers is carried out through the channel of formal authority, which implies the existence of clearly defined policies and regulations. The issue arises when formal instructions fail to predict all situations or when teachers develop certain expectations, which are not supported by the official statements. Organizational regulations and rules are subject to continuous modification and articulation, which makes it possible for confusion to occur.

In addition, teachers often receive instructions from various sources, such as senior teachers, previous principals, and colleagues. Thus, some practices may develop, which are not officially sanctioned but constantly used within the school. The problem emerges when such expectations acquire the status of an officially established policy, despite their unclear origin and the absence of supporting documentation. In other words, phantom policies exist when employees set up certain rules for themselves, believing that they were established by the official authority. For example, teachers may expect to make at least a certain number of entries in the grade book on a weekly basis or provide lesson plans according to specific standards. The expectation of such formal requirements can exist even when there is no official documentation, which indicates their status. Teachers may believe that these rules were established by the principal or school administration, which makes them subject to enforcement. Accordingly, non-compliance with such regulations can be perceived as a violation of the official policy, which can result in negative consequences for the teachers.

The issue of phantom policies is of paramount concern to the school principals, because they are often unaware of their existence. New principals may become aware of the already existing phantom policies when communicating with the teachers or interacting with the school as an organization. Subsequently, this information can be used to reinforce the already existing expectations, which contribute to the informal policy. In some cases, the ambiguity of the status of certain regulations can serve as a tool for exercising authority, when the principal uses it to influence the teachers' behavior. Such a strategy can be implemented in situations when a principal discovers a phantom policy, which already exists among the teachers. In other words, the principal may exercise his or her authority by utilizing the

opportunity to provide vague instructions, which have the status of an official policy. Thus, the current study will be concerned with the phenomenon of phantom policies and the ways in which they manifest themselves in schools.

Research Questions

This study sought to establish how phantom policies are created and how they gain power within schools, specifically, how principals and teachers interact with them. Therefore, the research question that guided the study was:

Main Research Question

How do principals discover, sustain, and exploit phantom policies to manage teachers?

The following sub-questions were guiding:

1. How are phantom policies generated?
2. How do principals discover phantom policies practiced by teachers?
3. How are these policies communicated, interpreted, and sustained?
4. Why do teachers comply with phantom policies?
5. How do principals exploit phantom policies to manage teachers?
6. What factors facilitate the establishment of phantom policies as organizational requirements?
7. How do teachers react when they discover that a policy is not official?
8. Under what conditions are phantom policies challenged, revised, or terminated?
9. What are the benefits and limitations of phantom policies?

Research Objectives

General Objective

The general objective of this study was to determine how principals discover, sustain, and exploit phantom policies as a mechanism of managing teachers.

Specific Objectives

The specific objectives that guided this study were:

1. Defining the term phantom policy and distinguishing it from formal, informal, organizational, and policy.
2. Establishing the sources of phantom policies.
3. Determining how principals learn about phantom policies through observation, communication, organizational mechanisms, and interaction with teachers.
4. Assessing how the phantom policies are communicated, interpreted, presented, reinforced, and sustained.
5. Examining why teachers comply with the phantom policies when they have no official origin.
6. Elucidating how the principals take advantage of the phantom policies to manage teachers.
7. Determining factors that facilitate the adoption of phantom policies as organizational requirements.

8. Exploring how teachers respond to the phantom policies they perceive as organizational requirements.

9. Examining the factors that challenge, revise, weaken, or terminate the phantom policies.

10. Evaluating the impact of the phantom policies on organizational requirements, employee relations, management, and organizational commitment.

11. Developing a framework that expounds the life cycle of the phantom policies: emergence, discovery, adoption, exploitation, contestation, and termination.

12. Recommending strategies that school administrators may adopt in distinguishing between organizational requirements and phantom policies to enhance effective management of the teachers.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it examines an emerging phenomenon that shapes the behavior of employees in organizations. The new concept explains how organizational requirements originate and how they influence employee performance when they lack formal sanction. The research will add to the body of knowledge by introducing this concept and establishing how organizational requirements become sources of power for managers in influencing employee behaviour.

Theoretical Significance

The study contributes to the theoretical foundations of organizational behavior, power, institutions, organizational culture, and education leadership. The theory of power illuminates the mechanisms through which principals gain and maintain power by influencing the behavior of teachers through phantom policies. However, the traditional power theories cannot explain how policies that lack formal sanction may gain power within an organization. Therefore, this study adds to the theoretical basis of power by demonstrating how organizational requirements acquire legitimacy, thereby becoming institutionalized. Similarly, this study adds to the institutional theory by showcasing how organizational requirements originate and evolve into institutionalized rules and regulations. The study also contributes to the organizational culture and education leadership theories by examining how phantom policies influence employee compliance with organizational requirements.

Practical Significance for Principals

Principals may benefit from this study by understanding how phantom policies originate and how they can control them to enhance effective management of the teachers. Some phantom policies may originate from their own actions or instructions, therefore, by recognizing their sources, principals may avoid adopting detrimental policies and embrace those that enhance organizational effectiveness. Also, the study will enable the principals to clarify whether a particular organizational requirement is official or a phantom policy.

Practical Significance for Teachers

The study may benefit the teachers by helping them understand why they comply with certain organizational requirements. This knowledge will enable them to differentiate between official and unofficial policies and enhance their decision-making processes. Therefore, the research will contribute to empowering teachers to engage in responsible behaviors as employees of the school.

The study may also benefit the education authorities since it will shed light on how phantom policies influence the practices of teachers in the schools. Therefore, if organizational requirements are not official policies, the findings will help the authorities come up with strategies that can be used to reveal the sources of phantom policies that hinder effective teaching and learning. Overall, the study is significant because it helps demystify organizational behavior in schools. The research is critical in demonstrating how employees can be influenced by organizational requirements that lack legitimacy. This is notable for enhancing effective management and leadership of education institutions, which will ultimately benefit society. Moreover, the study will provide practical insights that can help in managing employees in other organizations that face similar challenges.

Scope and Delimitations of the Study

This study focuses on the phenomenon of phantom policies within school organizations, examining the relationship between such perceived but unsupported requirements and teacher behavior. The study will be focused primarily on the organizational processes through which the expectations originate, gain legitimacy, and influence behavior. Phantom policies will be reviewed from the perspectives of both the school principals and the teachers. This is because principals have formal authority and may therefore discover, reinforce, interpret, or strategically leverage informal expectations, while teachers' perceptions, interpretation, and reaction are the crucial factors determining whether a phantom policy will acquire practical influence. The study will be focused primarily on the following aspects related to phantom policies: emergence, discovery, communication, interpretation, maintenance, institutionalization, strategic use, resistance, and consequences. The study will give special attention to situations in which teachers perceive a requirement to act in a particular way as mandatory, despite the lack of formal basis, absence of documentation, or being unclear or difficult to verify.

The research will distinguish phantom policies from the concepts of formal policies, informal rules, organizational norms, traditions, routines, and professional practices. An informal practice will not qualify as a phantom policy. The concept will mainly be used to denote an expectation that, despite the lack of clear formal authorization or documentation, is perceived by the employees as an organizational requirement. This study will adopt a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews, observation, and analysis of relevant organizational documents. This is because the research will seek to determine how the principals and the teachers interpret organizational expectations and how this affects behavior. There will be several delimitations that will be made by the study. Firstly, the study will focus on the school-level management rather than universities, corporations, government agencies, or other organizational settings. Secondly, the study will examine the relationship between principals and teachers rather than students or parents, although their influence may be considered if directly involved in the emergence or maintenance of phantom policies. Thirdly, the study will focus on perceived requirements rather than deliberately fabricated information or policies created for fraudulent purposes. Fourthly, the study will not seek to determine whether every informal school practice is legitimate or illegitimate; it will instead investigate how organizational members perceive them.

The study will be limited by the selected geographical area, the participating schools, and the participants that will be available for

recruitment. Therefore, it may not be possible to generalize to all schools. The study will provide analytical and theoretical insight into how organizational expectations may acquire managerial power. These delimitations are necessary in order to ensure that the analytical focus of the study is not lost and in order that it can investigate the phenomenon in sufficient depth.

Introduction

The literature review provides the theoretical and empirical basis for understanding phantom policies as a potential mechanism of informal management within school organizations. Schools operate through a combination of formal structures and informal processes. While formal policies define officially recognized responsibilities, procedures, and standards, everyday organizational behavior is influenced by social expectations, professional norms, routines, interpersonal relationships, and shared interpretations of organizational requirements. Understanding the interaction between these formal and informal dimensions is therefore essential for examining how principals influence teachers outside the direct exercise of formal authority.

Existing scholarship on educational leadership has primarily focused on the formal responsibilities of principals, including instructional leadership, administrative decision-making, supervision, performance management, and organizational improvement. Other lines of organizational research have investigated informal rules, organizational culture, institutional norms, social control, workplace expectations, and the exercise of power outside formal hierarchical structures. Together, these bodies of literature demonstrate that organizational behavior cannot be fully explained by written policies.

The concept of phantom policies builds upon these existing perspectives while focusing on a more specific phenomenon: situations in which individuals perceive an organizational requirement as authoritative even though its formal basis is absent, ambiguous, or unverifiable. The literature review therefore examines concepts that help explain how such perceptions may emerge and acquire behavioral influence. Particular attention is given to the distinction between formal policies and informal rules, the role of organizational culture and institutionalization, the operation of informal power, and the processes through which organizational members make sense of ambiguous expectations.

The review also considers the role of principals as both formal authority figures and organizational actors capable of influencing behavior through informal mechanisms. Principals may not necessarily create phantom policies themselves. Such expectations may emerge from previous leadership practices, misunderstandings, peer communication, organizational traditions, or ambiguous administrative instructions. Nevertheless, principals may discover, reinforce, modify, or strategically invoke these expectations in managing teachers.

The purpose of this chapter is therefore not simply to summarize existing research but to establish the intellectual foundation for the present investigation. It highlights what is already known about formal authority, informal organizational processes, and employee compliance while raising awareness of what remains insufficiently understood about perceived rules without clear formal authorization.

The chapter proceeds by reviewing school leadership and principal authority, formal and informal organizational rules, informal power, institutional theory, organizational culture, sensemaking,

administrative discretion, and mechanisms of employee compliance. It then highlights the principal research gap and develops a conceptual understanding of phantom policies that will guide the subsequent theoretical and empirical analysis.

School Leadership and Principal Authority

School leadership is a central component of effective educational administration because principals influence organizational goals, teacher performance, institutional culture, and the overall functioning of schools. Traditionally, the principal is understood as the formal authority responsible for coordinating school activities, implementing educational policies, supervising teachers, managing resources, and ensuring compliance with institutional and governmental requirements. This formal position gives principals legitimate authority to establish expectations and make administrative decisions within the boundaries of applicable regulations. Formal authority does not fully explain how principals influence teachers in everyday organizational settings. School environments involve continuous interpersonal interaction in which teachers interpret instructions, expectations, and organizational signals. Consequently, leadership operates through communication, relationships, professional norms, routines, and shared understandings. The distinction between what a principal is formally authorized to require and what teachers believe the principal expects is therefore important for understanding organizational behavior.

Traditional approaches to school leadership have emphasized the principal's role as an administrator and decision-maker. Under this perspective, authority is exercised through clearly defined responsibilities, organizational procedures, supervision, evaluation, and formal accountability mechanisms. Such mechanisms provide predictability because teachers can identify the source and scope of their obligations. Formal policies also provide a basis for accountability by allowing organizational members to determine whether a particular requirement has legitimate institutional authorization. Contemporary approaches to educational leadership have increasingly emphasized the relational and organizational dimensions of leadership. Instructional leadership, transformational leadership, distributed leadership, and other approaches recognize that principals influence school outcomes through interactions with teachers and other organizational actors. Leadership therefore involves not only directing behavior but also establishing shared expectations, developing organizational culture, and influencing how teachers understand their professional responsibilities.

This broader understanding of leadership is particularly relevant to the study of phantom policies. When formal rules do not completely specify expected behavior, teachers may rely on organizational cues to determine what they should do. A principal's statements, previous decisions, reactions to particular behaviors, or even silence may be interpreted as indicators of organizational expectations. Once such interpretations become shared among teachers, an expectation can acquire practical authority even without appearing in an official policy document. The principal's position may strengthen this process because teachers generally recognize the principal as an authoritative organizational actor. Consequently, an ambiguous statement from a principal may be interpreted differently from the same statement made by a colleague. Hierarchical relationships can contribute to the transformation of informal expectations into perceived obligations.

At the same time, principals are not necessarily the creators of all informal expectations. Phantom policies may originate from

previous principals, senior teachers, administrative traditions, misunderstandings, or informal communication networks. A current principal may simply inherit these expectations and discover that teachers already treat them as rules. The principal may then reinforce, clarify, ignore, or strategically use them. This creates an important distinction between formal authority and perceived authority. Formal authority derives from an officially recognized position and delegated powers, whereas perceived authority concerns what organizational members believe a leader is entitled or expected to require. Phantom policies may operate within this gap. A teacher may comply not because of a formal regulation but because the teacher believes that the principal expects it.

Therefore, examining principal authority requires attention to both its formal and informal dimensions. The present study builds upon this distinction by exploring how principals may interact with phantom policies and how these perceived requirements can become mechanisms for shaping teacher behavior without the direct issuance of formal rules.

Formal and Informal Organizational Rules

Organizations rely on rules to coordinate activities, establish expectations, regulate behavior, and achieve institutional objectives. In schools, rules determine how teachers perform their professional responsibilities, interact with students and colleagues, complete administrative tasks, and participate in institutional activities. However, organizational rules do not exist exclusively in written documents. Alongside formal policies and regulations, schools develop informal expectations that influence behavior through social interaction, organizational culture, professional traditions, and shared understandings. The distinction between formal and informal rules is therefore essential for understanding how organizational behavior is regulated. Formal rules are officially established requirements that have identifiable sources of authority. They may be expressed through laws, government regulations, institutional policies, staff handbooks, employment contracts, administrative directives, or officially approved procedures. Formal rules generally provide employees with information about what is required, permitted, or prohibited. Because they have an identifiable source, formal rules also create a basis for accountability. A teacher who is instructed to follow a formal requirement can generally verify its existence and determine the authority under which it was established.

Formal rules serve several important organizational functions. They create predictability, coordinate activities, reduce uncertainty, establish standards, and provide mechanisms for monitoring and accountability. In educational institutions, formal rules can establish requirements concerning attendance, assessment, curriculum implementation, record keeping, professional conduct, and administrative responsibilities. Ideally, employees should be able to distinguish these formal obligations from recommendations, customs, and informal expectations. In practice, however, organizational life extends beyond formal structures. Informal rules emerge as a result of repeated social interaction and collective experience. They may determine how employees communicate with senior staff, how meetings are conducted, how responsibilities are informally distributed, or which behaviors are regarded as appropriate within a particular organization. Unlike formal rules, informal rules are generally not documented or officially enacted. Nevertheless, they may exert substantial influence because

organizational members learn and reproduce them through everyday interaction.

Informal rules can develop from several sources. They may originate in longstanding traditions, previous administrative decisions, peer expectations, professional customs, or practical adaptations to organizational circumstances. Over time, repeated behavior can make an informal practice appear natural and unquestionable. New employees may learn these expectations from experienced colleagues rather than from official organizational documents. The existence of informal rules is not necessarily problematic. Indeed, organizations often require informal coordination because formal policies cannot anticipate every situation. Informal practices can increase flexibility, strengthen cooperation, and allow employees to respond to circumstances that formal regulations do not address. However, problems can arise when informal expectations become indistinguishable from formal requirements.

This distinction is particularly important for understanding phantom policies. A phantom policy is not simply an unwritten rule. An informal rule may be openly recognized as an organizational custom without anyone claiming that it is formally mandated. A phantom policy, by contrast, may be perceived as an authoritative requirement even when its formal basis is absent, ambiguous, or unverifiable. The critical issue is therefore the relationship between perceived obligation and actual authorization. For example, if teachers voluntarily agree that everyone should share teaching materials every Friday, this may represent an informal organizational norm. However, if teachers believe that the principal has formally required five grade-book entries every week, despite there being no such documented requirement, the expectation may constitute a phantom policy. The behavioral consequence can be similar to that of a formal rule even though the institutional foundation is fundamentally different.

The transition from informal practice to perceived policy may occur through repetition, hierarchical communication, peer reinforcement, organizational memory, or assumptions about administrative expectations. Once employees collectively believe that an expectation is mandatory, they may comply even without verifying its formal source. This process creates an important area of uncertainty in which informal organizational practices can acquire the appearance and practical force of formal authority. Therefore, the literature on formal and informal organizational rules provides an essential foundation for examining phantom policies. It demonstrates that organizational behavior is shaped by more than written regulations and that informal expectations can become powerful mechanisms of coordination and control. The distinctive contribution of the present study is to investigate what happens when an informal expectation is perceived as an officially binding requirement despite lacking a clear formal basis, and how principals may discover, maintain, or strategically leverage such expectations to influence teacher behavior.

Informal Power in Organizations

Power is one of the pervasive phenomena in the context of organizational behavior since individuals interact with each other to meet specific organizational goals. In most cases, power is conferred upon individuals based on their position, authority, and ability to control resources in relation to other group members. For instance, a principal in a school has formal power because his position allows him to undertake certain activities such as directing and evaluating subordinates, making decisions, and enforcing

policies. On the other hand, organizational behavior cannot be explained by formal power alone. It is possible to influence others through informal channels by relying on social influence, information, reputation, and organizational expectations, among other aspects. Informal power emanates from an individual's ability to impact the behavior, actions, thoughts, perception, and/or motives of other people through means other than direct formal authority. In a school setup, informal power can be demonstrated by a head teacher, senior teachers, and influential informal groups, who can influence their colleagues' behaviors based on certain expectations.

First, it is noteworthy that informal power can be exercised unconsciously. People do not always realize that their behavior is dictated by the expectations of others or their anticipation of the expectations. For instance, teachers may change their behavior due to the expectations of the principal even when the latter does not directly demand specific actions. Teachers may obey an informal norm because colleagues consider it to be correct or because the principal would disapprove of their conduct if they knew. Thus, informal power will be demonstrated when people change their behavior in accordance with the expectations of others even when they are not overtly directed. Second, informal power tends to be critical in organizations and/or systems that operate in complex and uncertain environments. Policies cannot always stipulate every aspect of organizational behavior and, therefore, some rules remain vague. In such circumstances, it becomes necessary to rely on informal power to help people understand what is expected of them. The expectations of those in power positions can dictate organizational behavior.

Similarly, people are also likely to conform to expectations so as to avoid social sanctions. Teachers might obey the expectations of their colleagues so as to avoid being outcast or criticized by their peers. Even when a regulation is not explicitly stated, conformity remains critical because the organizational group demands conformity with the informal expectations. Subsequently, as the number of group members who demonstrate conformity increases, those who do not conform will face sanctions such as criticism.

Information is another influential aspect that can be used to demonstrate informal power in a school setup. People can be influenced based on their perception of what ought to be done or based on the information that they possess. In most cases, principals and senior teachers have more information about the school's operations. They provide this information to junior teachers, who rely on this information to understand the school's informal expectations. In most cases, people exercise informal power because they have the information or because they interpret the information in a particular way.

Informal power helps explain why a phantom policy can dictate organizational behavior. A phantom policy can be used to explain the source of the informal power. Teachers will consider a phantom policy as a guideline for behavior even when the principal has not overtly demanded it. Thus, people are willing to obey the informal expectations because they believe that sanctions will be imposed if they do not conform.

It is critical to note that phantom policies and informal power should not be used interchangeably. A phantom policy does not emanate from intentional manipulation; it results from misinterpretation or from the mere fact that an activity has been continually performed without questioning its origin. On the other hand, informal power can be demonstrated intentionally or

unconsciously. A principal can unconsciously demonstrate informal power by repeatedly stating that something should be done or by failing to correct false information. On the other hand, a principal might recognize that a phantom policy is in existence and, therefore, use it to attain specific goals. In most cases, the two terms are related but emanate from different perspectives. The issue of informal power is critical to this study because it provides the theoretical basis for the phantom policy. In this study, it becomes critical to question not only whether a phantom policy exists but also to explore why people believe in its existence and how they can use the belief to influence other people. In this regard, the literature on informal power helps to explain why organizational rules and guidelines exist.

Institutional Theory

The institutional theory focuses on the fact that organizations are part of broader social systems that entail values, beliefs, and practices that must be followed, complied with, and/or performed. It is based on the fact that most organizations are rational in nature and, therefore, pursue policies that are conducive to achieving specific goals. The theory highlights the fact that organizations can benefit from the presence of institutionalization in promoting orderliness, structure, and stability within a given system. Thus, institutionalization refers to the extent to which an organization has developed a set of commonly shared beliefs, values, and practices. In other words, institutionalization entails the process through which organizations become routinized whereby members accept a given reality as normal because it has always existed.

The concept of institutionalization is critical in explaining the operation of schools. Most schools operate based on specific formal policies and rules. At the same time, they also rely on informal rules and policies that have existed continuously over time. For instance, most teachers learn the informal rules and guidelines from their interactions with other staff members, their predecessors, and the overall environment. In this regard, institutionalization can help explain why formal policies and guidelines are performed routinely and, therefore, become taken-for-granted practices.

The institutional theory is also critical in understanding the phenomenon of a phantom policy. The theory focuses on the fact that certain organizational practices can be adopted or performed simply because they appear to be appropriate, reasonable, or normal. For instance, a phantom policy can originate from a statement or practice that is unclear or uncertain. Over time, it can develop into an institutional practice simply because it appears to be correct. In other words, members start to accept the practice because it has existed over time and not because there is empirical evidence highlighting its validity or rationality. Thus, institutionalization can be used to explain the origin of a phantom policy. The process can be described as follows:

Uncertain statement/practice → Continual practice → Shared interpretation of the practice → Taken-for-granted institutional practice

During the final stage, it becomes difficult to question the practice since everyone considers it to be normal and appropriate. Although the practice might originate from one person or a small group of people, it becomes institutionalized within the organization because others have adopted it. Consequently, institutionalization can affect the way people respond to phantom policies. Some

people might accept the practice because they consider it legitimate while others might obey it because they fear sanctions.

One of the key concepts of the institutional theory is legitimacy. The concept refers to the extent to which actors within and/or outside an organization consider a given practice, policy, or decision as being desirable or appropriate. Legitimacy plays a critical role in ensuring that organizational practices are followed, complied with, and/or performed. With reference to phantom policies, institutionalization can help explain why a statement or practice can be considered legitimate even when it is not explicitly articulated or institutionalized. In other words, a phantom policy can gain legitimacy simply because it has existed or appeared to be rational.

Institutional legitimacy can also be useful in explaining why phantom policies continue to exist even when they are not explicitly endorsed by the principal. The concept can help explain the fact that phantom policies exist simply because they are considered to be appropriate or rational. In most cases, people within the organization consider a phantom policy to be rational even when it does not have empirical evidence or logical reasoning supporting it. In addition, it can be a source of explanation for why an organization can continue to operate based on a phantom policy even when the person who instituted it is removed.

Another key concept of the institutional theory is institutional memory. The concept suggests that organizations can develop memory based on certain practices, decisions, and statements that have been made in the past. In addition, this memory can be used to inform future practices, decisions, and/or statements. In the context of a phantom policy, institutional memory can explain the origin of the practice, which is usually unclear. The memory can also explain why the practice continues to exist even when its origin is not explicitly highlighted. For instance, teachers might believe that a given practice was instituted by the previous principal or has always existed simply because it has continued to be practiced over time. Thus, institutional memory can also help explain why institutionalization takes place even when the initial reasons for developing a particular policy are not explicitly articulated.

The institutional theory is also critical in explaining why phantom policies can continue to exist within schools, even when they are not explicitly endorsed by the principal. The theory highlights the fact that organizations are inclined to continue operating according to existing practices simply because they appear to be rational or appropriate. In this case, schools may continue to operate according to a phantom policy simply because they consider it to be rational or appropriate. In addition, the teachers may conform to the phantom policy because it appears to be the best option, even when there are other available alternatives.

At this point, it is evident that the institutional theory can be used to explain the maintenance and institutionalization stages of the phantom-policy life cycle. Maintenance refers to the fact that a phantom policy will continue to exist and/or be followed even when its origins are questioned. Institutionalization refers to the fact that the practice will be followed, obeyed, and/or performed by everyone, even when its origins are questioned. Thus, this theory can be used to explain how exactly a phantom policy, which was initially unclear or uncertain, can become a formal organizational practice.

On the other hand, it is important to note that this theory cannot explain the source of phantom policies. In other words, the theory

can explain how a practice will be maintained within an organization, but it does not emphasize how a phantom policy can originate. In addition, the institutional theory does not expound how organizational actors can purposefully use a phantom policy to pursue specific organizational goals. As a result, this paper will focus on the role of power and sensemaking in the life cycle of a phantom policy.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is one of the essential mechanisms by which phantom policies gain their informal legitimacy and come to be regarded as generally accepted requirements. When a phantom policy emanates from the organization's culture, its requirements are viewed as legitimate by teachers and are implicitly sanctioned by the administration. Organizational culture thus shapes teachers' behaviors, attitudes, and views in ways that often contradict the principal's expectations.

While official policies and regulations emanate from the school's formal authority structures, culture is generally formed by the teachers' informal interactions with each other and with the administration. Teachers learn the expectations from their colleagues, observe the behavior of their more experienced counterparts, gain knowledge and practice from their interactions with students, and receive feedback from the administration and parents. As such, the cultural expectations of an organization can encapsulate practices that are not explicitly mandated by its official authority structures.

An important characteristic of culture is that it often legitimizes practices that have emerged unofficially. A given practice, once it gains cultural legitimacy, comes to be regarded as a natural part of reality. Organizational culture often plays a vital role in the emergence of phantom policies as self-generating mechanisms, where the practice itself seems to acquire legitimacy regardless of the authority that mandated it.

For example, if the teachers of a school begin to routinely complete a certain report required by the administration every week, an initial requirement will not have a formal sanction of the school administration. With time, new teachers joining the school will be viewed as obligated to follow this procedure since it has been unofficially adopted by the majority of the teachers. Even if the report is never explicitly mandated by the school administration, the practice will continue informing teachers' conduct.

The unofficial nature of a phantom policy is especially important when its legitimacy is based in culture. New teachers learn the informal rules of an organization from more experienced colleagues, and they often rely on them to understand the school's unspoken expectations. Cultural practices are often passed from more experienced to less experienced workers, which grants them a sense of inevitability and naturalness. Additionally, senior teachers may give direct guidance concerning the school's expectations, helping new teachers navigate the school's informal rules. Senior teachers will often tell new teachers what the principle expects from them, what practices should be routinely followed, and which behaviors should be officially sanctioned. As such, the principal's expectations can gain unofficial legitimacy and shape teachers' conduct even without the explicit sanction of the school administration.

The cultural legitimacy of a phantom policy often serves as the critical mechanism to ensure that it is obeyed by the majority of the teachers. As such requirement rarely has the explicit sanction of

the school administration, the phantom policy enforcer must rely on other mechanisms to ensure that their behavior is viewed as legitimate by their colleagues. Phantom policy enforcer will often use the implicit support of their colleagues to help them achieve their goals. Even though they are unable to formally sanction dissent, they may gain the ability to ostracize dissenting colleagues from future collaborations and social events. They may seek to impose cultural punishments on the teachers that have expressed dissent. For example, the enforcer may raise concerns concerning a colleague's conduct with the school administration, damage their reputation within the organization, and question their competence as an educator.

Phantom policy enforcer will be in a position to implicitly help their colleagues to enforce cultural expectations. The implicit support of an enforcer by their colleagues is crucial for the survival of a phantom policy. When such a practice is supported by enough people, the organization's culture will unofficially endorse it, granting the new legitimacy and the ability to continue existing. Colloquially, a phantom policy may unofficially become a recognized aspect of the organization's culture, turning into a generally recognized requirement even if it is not explicitly mandated by the school administration.

The legitimacy of a phantom policy is often derived from the implied sanctions it carries. A phantom policy that requires its followers to act in a specific way can ensure that its requirements are obeyed by the majority. The implicit support from colleagues and the ability to sanction violators allows a phantom policy to survive even if it is officially unsanctioned by the organization. When a teacher begins to routinely violate a phantom policy, they may be punished by the enforcer through informal sanctions or the threat of being formally sanctioned by the organization. Such a punishment may range from social isolation to criticism of their conduct by the school administration.

The implied sanctions that are used by phantom policy enforcers to ensure conformity are often regarded as culturally justified by their colleagues. The enforcers' cultural legitimacy allows them to punish those that violate a phantom policy by holding them accountable for the consequences. For example, a phantom policy enforcer may argue that a violator will not be able to maintain their position within the profession due to their conduct. Such a sanction allows the enforcer to ensure that their colleagues will hold their conduct in higher regard.

Organizational culture can greatly aid the goals of a phantom policy enforcer. If I wish to ensure that my colleagues conduct themselves in a particular, I may attempt to shape the culture of the organization to formally recognize this requirement. A phantom policy that has originated from a teacher may become recognized as the officially sanctioned rule, with the teacher's implicit authority being replaced with the explicit authority of the organization.

I would find it comparatively easier to influence an organization's culture when addressing a newly established school with little existing traditions or practices. This new arrangement would allow an emergent leader to establish their implicit authority by mandating a set of new practices for their colleagues to follow. Such a leader would be successful in transforming these practices into unofficial rules that their colleagues would be expected to follow without the organization's explicit sanction.

When addressing an established school with a strong culture, an emergent leader will have a more difficult time establishing new

unofficial rules. In such a case, a leader may attempt to modify an aspect of the school's existing culture to help them achieve their goals. This tactic can be particularly useful when attempting to transform the aspect of the school's culture into an officially sanctioned practice.

Organizational culture can help a phantom policy enforcer to mandate unofficial requirements by granting them implicit legitimacy. Such requirements may originate from the school's culture or may be officially mandated by a teacher that has gained the implicit support of their colleagues. In either case, the requirements of a phantom policy are often perceived as legitimate and implicitly sanctioned by the organization's culture.

Theoretical Framework

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the theoretical framework through which the phenomenon of phantom policies will be analyzed. The preceding literature review demonstrated that organizational behavior in schools cannot be understood solely through formal policies, hierarchical authority, or officially established administrative procedures. Teachers and principals operate within a complex organizational environment in which informal expectations, social norms, institutionalized practices, perceptions of authority, organizational culture, and processes of interpretation can substantially influence behavior.

The central problem addressed by this study is the existence of organizational expectations that appear to possess the force of formal policy despite lacking clear, formal, or verifiable institutional authorization. These expectations are conceptualized as phantom policies. Understanding their emergence and influence requires a theoretical framework capable of explaining several interconnected processes: how ambiguous expectations acquire legitimacy, how employees interpret and reproduce them, how organizational power operates through perceived obligations, how informal practices become institutionalized, and how principals may use such expectations to influence teacher behavior.

No single theory adequately captures all of these processes. Institutional Theory helps explain how practices acquire legitimacy and become taken for granted. Foucault's concept of disciplinary power provides a framework for understanding how behavior can be regulated through surveillance, normalization, and self-discipline. Lukes' three-dimensional conception of power helps identify visible and less visible forms of influence, including the shaping of preferences and perceptions. Weberian theory provides a foundation for distinguishing formal authority from the perceived legitimacy of authority. Sensemaking Theory explains how organizational actors interpret ambiguous information and construct shared understandings.

The study therefore adopts an integrated theoretical framework rather than relying on a single theoretical perspective. Each theory addresses a different dimension of the phantom-policy phenomenon.

The framework is organized around five major theoretical perspectives:

1. Institutional Theory — explains legitimacy, institutionalization, and taken-for-granted practices.
2. Foucault's Theory of Disciplinary Power — explains normalization, surveillance, self-regulation, and behavioral control.

3. Lukes' Three Dimensions of Power — explains visible, hidden, and preference-shaping forms of power.

4. Weberian Authority Theory — explains formal authority, legitimacy, and the relationship between institutional position and perceived obligation.

5. Sensemaking Theory — explains how organizational actors interpret ambiguity and construct shared meanings.

The integration of these theories allows the study to examine phantom policies as a dynamic organizational process rather than as isolated misunderstandings or unofficial rules.

The analytical logic of the chapter is therefore:

Ambiguity → Interpretation → Perceived legitimacy → Social normalization → Institutionalization → Informal power → Behavioral influence

Within this process, the principal occupies a particularly important position. Principals possess formal organizational authority, but they also operate within informal systems of expectations and beliefs. A principal may therefore create, discover, reinforce, reinterpret, or strategically leverage a phantom policy. Teachers, meanwhile, may accept, reproduce, negotiate, resist, or challenge such expectations.

The theoretical framework consequently seeks to answer not only why teachers comply, but also how an unsupported organizational expectation becomes sufficiently legitimate to influence behavior and how principals may subsequently use that expectation as a managerial resource.

The chapter concludes by combining the selected theories into an integrated analytical framework that

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory provides the first major theoretical foundation for understanding phantom policies. The theory is particularly useful because it explains how organizational practices can acquire legitimacy, stability, and taken-for-granted status even when their original purpose or source becomes unclear over time.

Organizations do not operate solely according to technical requirements. They are also influenced by institutional expectations concerning what is considered appropriate, legitimate, normal, and acceptable. Organizations and their members frequently adopt practices because those practices are perceived as institutionally appropriate rather than because they have been demonstrated to be objectively necessary.

This perspective is highly relevant to schools. Educational organizations operate within broader institutional environments shaped by government regulations, professional standards, accreditation requirements, cultural expectations, community demands, and established educational traditions. However, the expectations operating within an individual school may extend beyond formally established requirements. Practices can become accepted through repetition and social recognition.

Institutionalization of Organizational Practices

Institutionalization refers to the process through which a practice becomes established and increasingly taken for granted within an organization.

An activity may initially be introduced for a specific reason. Over time, employees repeatedly perform it. New employees learn the

practice from existing staff. Managers continue to expect it. Eventually, employees may stop asking why the practice exists.

The process can be represented as:

Initial practice → Repetition → Social acceptance → Normalization → Institutionalization

Once institutionalized, the practice may acquire legitimacy independent of its original source.

This process is particularly important for phantom policies because their formal authorization may never have existed in the first place. An expectation can nevertheless become institutionally embedded through repeated organizational behavior.

For example, suppose a principal informally asks teachers to submit a particular report every Friday during a period of administrative pressure. The requirement is not formally incorporated into school regulations. However, teachers continue submitting the report. New teachers are told that Friday submission is “required.” After several years, employees may treat the requirement as an established administrative rule even though no formal policy document supports it.

Institutionalization therefore helps explain how an unsupported expectation can survive beyond the circumstances that originally produced it. Institutionalization and Principal Behavior

Institutional Theory is also useful for examining the role of principals.

When a new principal comes to school, he/she can find a number of practices that have become entrenched in the school culture. Some of these practices are based on formal, written policies, while others are merely informal practices that have accrued over time and may not have any formal basis at all. Most of these policies that have become entrenched in organizational culture are often referred to as phantom.

A new principal can take a number of different approaches to these phantom policies. First, the new administration can accept these practices as a given and leave them unchanged. Second, the new leader can interpret these phantom policies as unofficial, and take actions to officially adopt them or add them to the list of officially adopted regulations. Third, the new principal can challenge phantom policies by questioning their legitimacy as a basis for action and decision-making in the school. Finally, the new leader can take steps to completely eliminate these practices from the school culture.

In addition, the actions of the new administrator may inadvertently reinforce the existing phantom policy if his/her directives contradict existing regulations. This happens when a new principal publicly demands that school personnel perform actions that are not covered by existing policies. This could lead to the creation of phantom policies by teachers and school administrators.

To weaken the impact of unenforceable phantom policies, a new principal can ask critical questions about them, such as where exactly these policies are covered in the official documents. This allows teachers to separate unofficial practices from those that have been officially approved. Thus, a change in school administration can have different effects on the life and development of phantom policies. A new principal can weaken such policies by questioning their validity or simply eliminating them altogether. At the same time, a change in leadership can also strengthen phantom policies by formally adopting them as official school policy.

Institutionalization and Strategic Leverage

One of the most important theoretical implications for this study is the connection between institutionalization and managerial leverage.

Once a phantom policy becomes institutionalized, the principal does not necessarily need to establish its legitimacy personally. The organization may already regard the expectation as legitimate.

The principal can therefore inherit an existing belief and potentially use it to influence behavior.

This creates the following relationship:

Institutionalization → Perceived legitimacy → Reduced questioning → Greater behavioral influence → Potential managerial leverage

The principal's role can consequently shift from creator to reinforcer or strategic user of the phantom policy.

This distinction is important because a principal may exercise influence without directly creating the expectation.

Although Institutional Theory provides a strong explanation of legitimacy, normalization, and persistence, it does not by itself fully explain the power dynamics involved in phantom policies.

It can explain why a practice becomes accepted, but it provides less precise insight into:

1. how leaders actively shape employee perceptions;
2. how surveillance affects compliance;
3. how employees may internalize administrative expectations;
4. how power operates through apparently ordinary practices; and
5. how principals may strategically leverage an existing belief.

For these questions, Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and Lukes' theory of power provide additional analytical tools.

Institutional Theory should therefore be understood as explaining primarily the legitimization and institutionalization dimension of phantom policies. Application to the Present Study

In this study, Institutional Theory will be used to examine four central processes:

1. How phantom policies acquire legitimacy;
2. How repeated practices become normalized;
3. How unsupported expectations become taken for granted; and
4. How institutionalization allows such expectations to persist and potentially become resources for managerial influence.

The theory consequently provides the foundation for understanding how something that lacks formal authorization can nevertheless become organizationally real.

The central institutional proposition of the study is:

An organizational expectation can acquire practical legitimacy through repetition, social acceptance, and institutionalization even when its formal authorization is absent or unclear.

This proposition will be examined alongside the other theoretical perspectives in order to determine how institutional legitimacy interacts with power, authority, sensemaking, and teacher compliance.

Lukes' Three Dimensions of Power

Steven Lukes' conception of power offers the third theoretical foundation for this study. While many approaches to power conceptualize the ability of one actor to impose another actor's will, Lukes demonstrates that power can function in more than one dimension. Power may be visible in a decision-making process, less visible in the control of organizational agendas, and even deeper in the creation of perceptions, preferences, and understandings of what may or may not be possible or appropriate.

Lukes' conception is important for examining phantom policies because the influence may not appear to come directly from an actor. A teacher may comply with an expectation without receiving an explicit order from the principal. The teacher may believe that the requirement is legitimate, normal, or unavoidable. In such circumstances, power operates not through an observable act of command but through the organizational processes that influence the teacher's understanding of the situation. The First Dimension: Decision-Making Power

The first dimension of Lukes' framework concerns the observable decision-making power. Power is exercised when an actor makes decisions that affect another actor and is able to secure compliance with those decisions.

This aspect of power closely resembles traditional conceptions of managerial authority. Within schools, a principal may formally instruct teachers to submit reports, attend meetings, change schedules, follow particular procedures, or performs specific administrative tasks. These decisions are relatively visible because there is an identifiable decision-maker, an identifiable instruction, and an observable behavioral response. However, this dimension cannot adequately explain phantom policies. If a principal formally announces that teachers must complete five grade-book entries per week, the requirement is visible and can be examined as an exercise of formal authority. But if teachers believe that five entries are mandatory despite the absence of an official instruction, the source of power becomes considerably less visible. The first dimension nevertheless remains relevant because phantom policies may be activated through direct administrative communication. A principal may refer to an existing belief during a meeting or conversation and thereby reinforce it. In such circumstances, an observable decision or statement may strengthen an already existing phantom policy.

The first dimension therefore provides the starting point for distinguishing between visible administrative power and less visible forms of influence. Lukes' second dimension extends the analysis by examining the ability to control which issues enter the decision-making process. Power can operate not only through decisions that are made but also through issues that are prevented from being discussed. An actor may exercise influence by determining what is considered relevant, what is ignored, and what employees are encouraged or discouraged from questioning.

This dimension has significant implications for phantom policies. A phantom policy may survive because employees do not question its formal basis. If teachers believe that a requirement is already established, they may not consider whether it should be discussed or challenged. The issue of its legitimacy may therefore never enter the organizational decision-making agenda. For example, if teachers believe that a principal has the authority to require a particular administrative practice, they may discuss how to comply with the practice rather than whether the principal has formally authorized it. The organizational conversation therefore moves

from “Should this requirement exist?” to “How should we comply with it?”

This represents an important form of power. The absence of debate does not necessarily indicate that everyone agrees with the requirement. It may indicate that the legitimacy of the requirement has become so deeply assumed that questioning it is not perceived as a relevant organizational option. In this way, phantom policies can influence not only teacher behavior but also the boundaries of organizational discussion.

The Third Dimension: Preference-Shaping Power

The third dimension is the most significant for this study. Lukes’ argument that power can operate by shaping people’s perceptions, preferences, beliefs, and understanding of their interests has direct relevance to phantom policies. A teacher who believes that a particular practice is an official requirement may voluntarily comply with it. The teacher may not experience the behavior as coercion because the requirement has already been accepted as legitimate.

The crucial process is therefore:

Perceived requirement → Acceptance of legitimacy → Internalized obligation → Self-directed compliance

The principal may not need to issue a threat. The teacher’s understanding of the organizational environment may already produce the desired behavior.

This is one of the central theoretical insights of this study. Power can operate through belief about authority even when formal authority is absent.

Power without Direct Coercion

Lukes’ framework allows this study to move beyond an overly narrow understanding of compliance as the product of coercion. Teachers may comply with phantom policies for many reasons. They may fear administrative consequences, but they may also believe that the requirement is legitimate, assume that everyone else follows it, regard it as professionally appropriate, or simply accept it as part of organizational life. The absence of visible resistance does therefore not prove that formal authority is responsible for compliance. A teacher may comply because the teacher has already accepted the organizational definition of what should be done.

This is particularly important for understanding how phantom policies may function as low-cost managerial mechanisms. If employees regulate themselves according to a perceived requirement, the principal does not have to continuously monitor or formally enforce the behavior.

Hidden Power and Phantom Policy Maintenance

The second and third dimensions of Lukes’ theory are also useful for explaining maintenance. Once a phantom policy becomes established, organizational actors may contribute to its continuation without consciously intending to exercise power. Senior teachers may explain the expectation to new teachers. Colleagues may discourage others from questioning it. Administrators may refer to it during meetings. Teachers may reproduce it through routine practice. Consequently, no single actor necessarily needs to maintain the phantom policy. The expectation can become self-reproducing through organizational interaction. The process can be understood as: Initial expectation → Social acceptance → Limited questioning → Repetition → Shared belief → Continued influence

Power therefore becomes distributed across organizational relationships rather than concentrated exclusively in the principal.

3.4.7 Strategic Leverage and the Three Dimensions of Power

Lukes’ framework is particularly valuable for analyzing the strategic use of phantom policies.

1. A principal may exercise first-dimensional power by directly instructing teachers to follow an expectation.
2. A principal may exercise second-dimensional power by discouraging discussion about whether the expectation is formally authorized.
3. A principal may exercise third-dimensional power by reinforcing the belief that the expectation is legitimate, necessary, or simply part of being a good teacher.
4. The third possibility is particularly important because it may allow the principal to influence behavior without relying on direct commands. For example, instead of formally establishing a new reporting requirement, a principal may refer to an already existing belief that “the administration expects detailed weekly documentation.” Teachers who already accept this belief may increase their reporting behavior without receiving a formal directive. The principal has therefore leveraged an existing perception rather than created a new formal rule.

Applying Lukes’ Theory to This Study

Lukes’ theory will be used in this study to analyze how phantom policies operate across different dimensions of organizational power. The first dimension will help identify visible administrative decisions and direct enforcement. The second will help examine whether certain expectations prevent alternative interpretations or questions from entering organizational discussion. The third will be used to analyze how perceptions of legitimacy, normality, obligation, and professional appropriateness influence teacher behavior. The theory therefore makes it possible to distinguish between power exercised through direct commands, power exercised through control of organizational agendas, and power exercised through the shaping of organizational perceptions.

For this study, the central proposition derived from Lukes is: Phantom policies can become mechanisms of power when organizational beliefs shape what teachers perceive as legitimate, necessary, normal, or unavoidable, thereby influencing behavior without requiring continuous formal commands.

This perspective complements Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary power. Foucault helps explain how individuals internalize expectations and regulate themselves, while Lukes helps explain how power can operate through the shaping of organizational agendas and perceptions. Together, they provide a stronger theoretical basis for examining how phantom policies influence teacher behavior beyond the boundaries of formal authority.

Weberian Authority

Max Weber’s theory of authority provides an essential foundation for understanding the relationship between formal organizational authority and the perceived legitimacy of phantom policies. Weber distinguishes power from legitimate authority by emphasizing that authority involves the probability that a command will be obeyed because those subject to it regard the command as legitimate. This distinction is particularly important for this study because phantom policies may influence teacher behavior even when their formal authorization is unclear or absent.

In a school organization, the principal normally occupies a formally recognized position of authority. The principal's authority is derived from institutional structures such as appointment, organizational hierarchy, education regulations, employment contracts, and formally established administrative responsibilities. Teachers therefore generally recognize that principals possess legitimate authority to make certain decisions concerning school administration and professional conduct.

However, the existence of formal authority does not automatically mean that every expectation associated with the principal is formally authorized. A principal may possess legitimate authority in general while particular instructions, practices, or expectations may lack explicit institutional authorization. This distinction creates an important analytical space in which phantom policies can emerge.

Power and Legitimate Authority

Weber's distinction between power and authority is fundamental to this study. Power refers broadly to the possibility that an actor can impose their will within a social relationship, even when resistance exists. Authority, by contrast, is associated with the recognized legitimacy of a command. This distinction helps explain why teachers may comply with an organizational expectation without direct coercion.

If teachers believe that a requirement is legitimately authorized, compliance may occur because they recognize the authority behind it. Conversely, if the requirement lacks formal authorization but is still perceived as legitimate, compliance may continue because the perceived legitimacy of the expectation substitutes for its missing formal foundation.

This creates an important distinction between formal authority and perceived authority. A phantom policy may not possess formal authority, but it can acquire perceived authority through organizational communication, repetition, administrative association, professional expectations, and social confirmation.

The resulting situation can be described as a legitimacy-authority gap. The organizational expectation is treated as authoritative even though its formal basis cannot be clearly demonstrated.

Sensemaking Theory

Sensemaking Theory provides an essential perspective for understanding how phantom policies emerge from ambiguity, how employees interpret unclear organizational expectations, and how initially uncertain practices become accepted as legitimate requirements. While institutional theory explains how practices become normalized and Weberian theory explains the relationship between authority and legitimacy, sensemaking theory focuses on the interpretive processes through which organizational actors construct meaning from uncertain or incomplete information.

The concept of sensemaking is particularly relevant to schools because educational organizations contain numerous situations in which formal rules do not provide complete guidance. Teachers and administrators routinely encounter unclear instructions, changing expectations, incomplete information, conflicting interpretations, and informal communication. In such circumstances, organizational actors must determine what a situation means and what they are expected to do.

Phantom policies can emerge precisely within these interpretive spaces.

When formal authorization is unclear, employees may rely on conversations, previous experiences, colleagues, institutional traditions, administrative statements, and contextual cues to determine what is expected. Through these processes, an uncertain expectation can gradually become interpreted as a mandatory organizational requirement.

The Meaning of Sense-making

Sense-making refers to the process through which individuals and groups interpret ambiguous situations and construct plausible explanations that allow them to act. In organizational settings, people do not simply receive information objectively. They interpret information through existing experiences, social interactions, organisational identities, expectations, and contextual cues.

This is important because organizational behavior is often based not on complete knowledge of what is objectively true, but on what organizational actors believe to be sufficiently plausible.

A teacher who hears that "the administration expects weekly documentation" may not immediately investigate whether an official policy exists. Instead, the teacher may interpret the statement using previous experiences, observations of colleagues, and assumptions about the principal's authority. If other teachers behave as though the requirement exists, the teacher receives additional confirmation.

The expectation therefore becomes increasingly believable.

Sensemaking consequently helps explain how a phantom policy can develop without deliberate deception.

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological framework for investigating how principals discover, maintain, and strategically leverage phantom policies to influence teacher behavior. Phantom policies are fundamentally concerned with perceptions, interpretations, informal organizations, authority, and behavioral responses, and so the study needs a methodology which can capture the meanings that participants attribute to their experiences.

The study will adopt a qualitative research methodology and an interpretivist research philosophy. A qualitative approach is appropriate because phantom policies cannot be understood by simply checking whether there is a formal policy or not. The central concern is how principals and teachers perceive organizational expectations, how they determine whether such expectations are legitimate, how expectations get communicated and reproduced, and how they affect behaviors.

The methodology will be designed to examine phantom policies as a social and organizational process rather than a simple administrative irregularity. Special attention will be focused on the interaction between formal and perceived authority, organizational ambiguity, the processes by which expectations get normalized, and the conditions under which teachers comply, question, resist, or abandon such expectations.

The study will be designed as a multiple-case study to examine phantom policies across school organizational contexts. Data will primarily be gathered through semi-structured interviews, supported by organizational document analysis and observation,

and the resulting data will be analyzed thematically with particular attention to the emergence, transmission, interpretation, institutionalization, strategic use, and consequences of phantom policies.

The methodological design aligns with the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 3. Sensemaking Theory informs the exploration of how participants interpret ambiguous expectations whereas Weberian theory informs the analysis of authority and perceived legitimacy. Institutional Theory informs the examination of normalization and institutionalization whereas Foucault's concept of disciplinary power informs the understanding of self-regulation and behavioral conformity, and Lukes' multidimensional conception of power informs the examination of visible, hidden, and preference-shaping forms of influence.

Research Philosophy: Interpretivism

The study will adopt an interpretivist research philosophy. A phantom policy does not exist solely as an objective organizational document or directive. Its success depends upon whether participants perceive an expectation as legitimate, authoritative, mandatory, or otherwise consequential. Two teachers working in the same school may therefore interpret the same organizational expectation differently. Similarly, a principal may interpret an expectation as a professional preference while teachers interpret the same expectation as a compulsory administrative requirement.

An interpretivist approach enables the researcher to investigate these differences in meanings rather than assume that organizational reality is entirely independent of participants' interpretations.

The philosophy is compatible with the study's conceptualization of phantom policies as expectations which lie between formal authorization and perceived obligation. The research seeks to understand how participants build the organizational reality in which these expectations are embedded and not begin by assuming that a perceived policy is simply incorrect. The study also recognizes that organizational knowledge is produced through social interaction. Teachers learn from their colleagues, principals communicate expectations, administrators interpret regulations, and employees observe each other. Consequently, the meaning of a phantom policy may be formed collectively rather than by a single person.

The researcher will therefore treat participants' accounts as important evidence of the meanings by which organizational behavior is built. At the same time, participant perceptions will be compared, where applicable, with available formal documents and organizational evidence. This enables the study to distinguish an expectation which is formally authorized from an expectation which is perceived as authorized but does not have clear documentary support.

Research Approach: Qualitative Inquiry

The study will adopt a qualitative research approach because its primary objective is to understand processes, meanings, experiences, and organizational interactions.

Quantitative methods could potentially measure the frequency with which teachers report encountering unsupported expectations but such measurement alone would not explain how such expectations emerge, how such expectations become believable, why teachers comply with expectations or how principals may strategically leverage such expectations.

A qualitative approach enables such processes to be explored in depth.

The research seeks to focus on participants' experiences of organizational expectations and seek to reconstruct the processes by which phantom policies develop and gain practical influence. Interviews will provide an opportunity for participants to describe specific incidents, explain how they interpreted specific expectations, identify their sources of information, discuss their responses, and discuss whether they believed that expectations were formally authorized.

The approach is appropriate because phantom policies may differ substantially between schools. Such policies' content may depend upon organizational culture, leadership practices, institutional history, professional norms, and administrative conditions. A flexible qualitative design allows unexpected forms and mechanisms of phantom policy to emerge from the data rather than force participants' experiences into predetermined categories.

The approach is theoretically informed but allows empirical findings to refine, challenge, or extend the conceptual framework developed in the preceding chapters.

Research Design: Multiple-Case Study

The research will adopt a multiple-case study design. The case study approach is appropriate because phantom policies are embedded within specific organizational environments and cannot be entirely separated from the structures, relationships, histories, and leadership practices of individual schools.

Each participating school will be treated as a bounded case and attention will be given to the relationships between principals, teachers, and other relevant actors, and the informal expectations which influence them.

A multiple-case design is valuable because it enables the researcher to examine similarities and differences between organizational settings. A phantom policy which emerges through informal communication in one school may emerge through organizational tradition in another. A principal may strategically leverage an existing expectation in a case whereas another principal may unintentionally reinforce the same type of expectation.

Comparing cases enables the researcher to identify recurring mechanisms while recognizing variation in context.

The study will not seek to derive statistical generalizations from the selected schools to all educational institutions but analytical generalization by examining whether the theoretical mechanisms identified in the study can provide a useful explanation of phantom policies across comparable contexts.

The multiple-case design supports the theoretical objective of the research. The central concern is not simply to identify individual examples of unsupported expectations but to develop an analytical explanation of how expectations emerge, become legitimate, influence behavior, and potentially become managerial resources.

Research Setting and Organizational Context

The research will take place within school organizations in which principals have formal administrative responsibilities and in which teachers operate within formal structures and informal organizations. The school is an appropriate organizational setting because it involves formal regulations, substantial interpersonal interaction, professional discretion, administrative hierarchy, and informal organizational culture.

Schools also present multiple opportunities for the emergence of ambiguous expectations. Teachers regularly receive information through formal circulars, staff meetings, verbal instructions, informal conversations, professional networks, and observation of colleagues. Such multiple communication channels create the circumstances in which the distinction between formal policy and perceived policy may be unclear. The study will focus on organizational situations in which an expectation is perceived to be mandatory or authoritative but its formal authorization is unclear, absent, outdated, or difficult to verify. The study will not treat every informal practice as a phantom policy. An informal practice will be considered analytically as a phantom policy when there is a meaningful discrepancy between its perceived authority and its identifiable formal authorization.

This distinction is necessary to ensure conceptual precision and prevent the research from simply equating phantom policies with informal organizational behavior.

Participants

The primary participants will be individuals who have experience with school administration and organizational expectations. Principals will constitute a central participant group because the study specifically examines how principals discover, maintain, and strategically leverage phantom policies.

Teachers will constitute an essential participant group because their perceptions and behavioral responses provide evidence that an expectation actually functions as a phantom policy. Their accounts can reveal how expectations are communicated, how legitimacy is attributed, how compliance is produced, and how resistance develops.

Wherever appropriate and feasible, vice-principals, assistant principals, department heads, coordinators, or other staff members with administrative responsibilities may also participate. Their inclusion can provide additional perspectives on how expectations circulate between formal leadership structures and the wider teaching workforce.

The study will seek a diversity of participants in terms of their organizational roles and experiences and not simply maximize the number of participants. Such variation is important because different organizational actors may interpret the same expectation differently. Comparing the accounts of principals and teachers can reveal potential differences between the intended meaning of an administrative communication and the meaning which employees ultimately construct.

The final number of participants will be determined by the needs of the multiple-case design and that beyond which additional interviews do not yield substantial conceptual insights. The emphasis will be on depth and analytical richness rather than numerical representation.

Sampling Strategy

The study will employ purposive sampling. Participants will be chosen based upon their relevance to the phenomenon: their organizational roles and experiences will provide them with the ability to illuminate phantom policies, administrative expectations, teacher behavior, and informal organizational processes.

Purposive sampling is appropriate because not all members of a school organization will necessarily possess the knowledge to illuminate the phenomenon. Principals, experienced teachers,

department heads, coordinators, and others involved with potentially ambiguous or informally enforced organizational expectations are valuable sources of evidence.

Where access permits, snowball sampling may supplement purposive sampling. The participants may identify other individuals who have experience with particular organizational expectations or administrative practices. However, referrals will not automatically result in inclusion. Each potential participant will be evaluated according to the study's inclusion criteria and ethical requirements.

Sampling will also seek variation across organizational cases. Differences in school size, administrative structure, organizational culture, leadership experience, and other relevant differences may be considered where such variation is relevant to understanding the phenomenon.

The aim of sampling is therefore to identify information-rich participants capable of illuminating the mechanism through which phantom policies emerge.

Data Sources

This section details the data sources and methodology that will be employed in the study. The researcher will draw upon multiple qualitative methods to support the reliability of findings. The primary source of primary data will be semi-structured interviews with principals, teachers, and relevant administrative staff. These interviews will enable the researcher to understand what employees are understood to be expected or required in the organization. The researcher will also engage with organizational documents, such as official policies, administrative circulars, staff instructions, handbooks, and meeting records. These documents are valuable because they can provide evidence of whether an expectation mentioned by participants has formal organizational authorization or not. Where possible, the researcher will employ observation. Through observation, the researcher can understand how expectations are communicated, reiterated, and followed by everyday life in the organization.

Multiple sources are critical, as the study deals with the concept of the "phantom policy." A phantom policy is experienced when employees perceive something to be an organizational requirement, even though there may be no readily identifiable formal policy authorizing it. Therefore, the study will compare: what employees believe are required → what formal documents actually authorize. The aim is not to determine whether employees are correct or not. Instead, the researcher wishes to understand how a gap between perceived obligation and formal authorization is created, interpreted, and maintained.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Ensuring trustworthiness is critical in qualitative research, as the credibility of findings relies upon the quality and transparency of the research process. In the present study, special attention will be paid to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These dimensions are appropriate to evaluating the quality of a qualitative investigation into phantom policies, as the phenomenon involves subjective perceptions and potentially sensitive experiences with authority and compliance.

Credibility

Credibility involves the extent to which the findings provide a convincing representation of participants' experiences and the organizational processes under investigation. The study will bolster

credibility through methodological triangulation, comparison of participant perspectives, careful engagement with interview data, and where possible, comparison with organizational documents and observations.

Triangulation is particularly important, as phantom policies involve a potential discrepancy between perception and formal authorization. Perhaps a teacher perceives an expectation to be an official requirement, but available organizational documents provide no evidence of such a requirement. Perhaps a principal perceives an expectation to be informal while teachers perceive a mandatory practice. Comparison will enable the researcher to investigate the phenomenon from multiple organizational perspectives.

The researcher will also seek detailed accounts of particular incidents, as opposed to relying solely upon generalized statements. Asking participants to describe when an expectation was communicated, how they learned of it, how they reacted, and what consequences followed can yield richer evidence, compared to simply asking whether phantom policies exist.

Where appropriate, member checking may be used to clarify interpretations and prevent substantial misunderstanding of participants' accounts. An opportunity will be given to participants to clarify particular statements or interpretations, particularly if the information relates to particularly sensitive organizational practices.

Transferability

Transferability involves the extent to which readers can determine whether the findings may be relevant to other organizational contexts.

The study will not seek to generalize findings to all schools. Instead, it will provide sufficiently detailed descriptions of participating organizational contexts, participants' roles, and the processes through which phantom policies operate, to enable readers to determine their relevance to other contexts. Detailed contextual description is particularly important, as phantom policies may be influenced by organizational culture, leadership structures, communication systems, professional norms, and institutional history. Perhaps a finding is strongly obvious in one school but operates differently in another.

The study will therefore distinguish between findings that appear to represent recurring mechanisms and findings that appear to be particularly context-dependent.

Dependability

Dependability involves the consistency and transparency of the research process. The researcher will maintain a clear record of methodological decisions throughout the process of data collection and analysis. The research process will document decisions concerning participant selection, interview procedures, coding, theme generation, interpretation, and modification of analytical categories. Changes to the research design that become necessary during fieldwork will also be documented and justified. An audit trail will therefore be maintained to demonstrate how the researcher has transitioned from raw empirical material to codes, themes, interpretations, and final conclusions.

This is especially important, as the concept of the phantom policy is theoretically developed within the study. Maintaining a transparent analytical process will assist in ensuring that empirical material is not simply fit into the predefined concept.

Conformability

Conformability involves the extent to which findings are grounded in the evidence as opposed to being primarily driven by the researcher's personal assumptions.

The researcher will therefore distinguish between participants' statements, documentary evidence, observational evidence, and their own interpretation of that material. Analytical conclusions will be supported by the evidence provided by the collected data.

Reflexivity will also be incorporated into the research process. The researcher will remain aware that prior theoretical assumptions concerning power, authority, organizational culture, and informal governance may influence interpretation. Particular care will therefore be taken to consider alternative explanations for participants' behaviours.

For example, teacher compliance with an apparently unsupported expectation will not be immediately interpreted as evidence of coercive power. Compliance might be due to professional norms, uncertainty, organizational socialization, convenience, agreement with the practice, or a combination of factors.

This approach will assist in maintaining analytical openness and avoiding premature classifying of organizational practices as phantom policies.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are particularly important, as the study investigates organizational authority, managerial behavior, compliance, resistance, and potentially unsupported administrative expectations. Participants may feel uncomfortable discussing practices that could be perceived as criticizing principals, colleagues, or institutional procedures. Participation will therefore be voluntary. Participants will be informed of the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement, their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study in accordance with the relevant research requirements.

Informed consent will be obtained before any data collection takes place. Participants will be provided with enough information to determine their interest in participating. Confidentiality will be regarded as a core ethical requirement; personal names, school names, and other identifying information will be removed or substituted with pseudonyms where necessary. The reporting of findings will avoid unnecessary details that would reveal individual participants.

Particular care will be taken to protect teachers who discuss organizational practices that could potentially result in professional consequences. The researcher will avoid reporting information in a manner that unnecessarily exposes individual participants to retaliation or reputational harm. Interview recordings, transcripts, research notes, and other materials will be stored securely and accessed only for legitimate research purposes. Data will be handled in accordance with the relevant institutional and legal requirements governing research confidentiality and data protection.

The researcher will also avoid deliberately inciting conflict within participating schools. The purpose of the study is analytical as opposed to investigative or disciplinary. Participants will not be encouraged to confront colleagues or administrators as a part of the research process.

Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity is important, as the researcher is not entirely removed from the process of qualitative knowledge production. The researcher's assumptions, theoretical orientation, communication, and interpretation can influence the collection and analysis of qualitative data. The present study is theoretically informed by institutional theory, disciplinary power, multidimensional power, Weberian authority, and sensemaking theory. These perspectives are useful but might influence a tendency to interpret organizational practices with particular theoretical concepts.

The researcher will therefore remain attentive to evidence that challenges the proposed framework. For example, if participants describe an apparently unsupported expectation but demonstrate that they do not consider it mandatory, the expectation should not immediately be classified as a phantom policy. If teachers comply with an expectation because they genuinely agree with it, rather than because they perceive it to be authoritative, this distinction must be maintained.

Reflexivity will therefore involve continuous investigation of how the researcher's assumptions influence participant questioning, coding, interpretation, and theoretical conclusions. The researcher will also distinguish between the participant's understanding of an organizational practice and the subsequent interpretation the researcher makes. This distinction is critical to the interpretive integrity of the study.

Methodological Limitations

Several methodological limitations may influence the study.

Firstly, phantom policies are partly dependent upon participants' perceptions and recollections. Participants may not accurately recall the origin of an expectation or reconstruct past events in line with their current understanding. Retrospective accounts may therefore include gaps or inconsistencies.

Secondly, the subject involves organizational authority and potentially sensitive managerial practices. Some principals or teachers may be hesitant to discuss practices that could be interpreted negatively. Interview responses may therefore be influenced by social desirability.

Thirdly, documentary evidence may not always be available. Some schools may have incomplete records, inaccessible administrative documents, or informal communication systems, meaning there may be little written evidence. The absence of a document cannot always prove that no formal authorization ever existed.

Fourthly, access to schools and senior administrators may be difficult. Organizational gatekeepers may influence which participants are available for interviews and which activities can be observed.

Fifthly, the multiple-case design prioritizes depth over statistical representativeness. The findings will therefore provide analytical insights rather than quantitative estimates of the prevalence of phantom policies across the wider education system.

Finally, the researcher's interpretation plays a role in qualitative analysis. Triangulation, reflexivity, systematic coding, and an audit trail can bolster methodological rigor, but they will not completely eliminate interpretive judgment.

These limitations do not negate the value of the research; rather they define the conditions under which its findings should be

understood and provide important limitations to interpreting the empirical results.

Findings

Introduction

Empirical Findings: Phantom Policies as a Management Tool

This chapter reports the study's findings related to investigating phantom policies as emerging management phenomena in school organizations. The chapter focuses on the ways in which principals and teachers experience, interpret, reproduce and respond to organizational expectations that appear to be mandatory but lack verifiable or formal institutional authorization. The analysis explores such expectations from the perspective of management phenomena, emphasizing the processes of interpretation, interdependence, legitimacy attribution and normalization.

The findings are organized according to the conceptual life cycle of the phantom policy, which was identified in the previous chapters. Of particular interest to the analysis are issues of emergence/identification of phantom policies, the ways in which ambiguous expectations acquire credibility, the manner in which such expectations are communicated and maintained, and the opportunities for their strategic use by principals. Furthermore, the analysis focuses on teachers' response to ambiguous expectations and their organizational impact.

The findings stress the need to distinguish between formal policies, informal practices and phantom policies. Formal policies have clearly defined sources and well-elaborated communication and operationalization strategies. Informal practices do not have a policy status, which is evident from the way they emerge, develop, and are sustained. Phantom policies are ambiguous in terms of both their origin and legitimization. They do appear to be mandatory and are practiced by organizational members, but the source of such expectations cannot be verifiably identified or documented.

The findings reveal that phantom policies may emerge on both intentional and unintentional organizational levels. Phantom policies may develop as a result of vague communication and organizational memories about certain procedures, guidelines, and rules. Such policies may also be used intentionally by principals when they realize that employees already perceive an unsupported expectation as valid. The intentional use of a phantom policy by a leader does not mean, however, that they always create it.

The findings also illustrate that teachers' compliance should not be considered in isolation or in terms of direct pressure since several legitimizing and sustaining mechanisms appear to be involved. The analysis revealed several organizational influence tactics, which are used by principals and teachers in order to achieve compliance with unclear expectations. It was found that employees could perceive ambiguous expectations as if they were mandated by administrative figures or institutional socialization mechanisms. In addition, compliance could depend on anticipated organizational consequences and the degree to which such consequences are perceived as inevitable. In this respect, the analysis illustrates that employees' compliance with unclear organizational demands may often be related to their understanding of such requirements as legitimate and valid as well as their ability to conform to these demands.

Since the study used a qualitative multiple-case design, the analysis places greater emphasis on such factors as processes, meanings, organizational experiences rather than quantitative frequencies.

Therefore, the findings focus on the ways in which phantom policies develop, gain credibility, are operationalized, and their impact on employees. The analysis explores the processes through which ambiguous expectations acquire some of the attributes of organizational policies. Therefore, the findings reveal the mechanisms through which unsupported expectations may acquire practical authority in organizational settings.

Identifying Phantom Policies in School Organizations

The first issue to be addressed is the question of what makes a phantom policy different from an ordinary informal practice. The findings indicate that it is not sufficient to consider any unwritten expectation as a phantom policy since schools contain numerous informal expectations related to communication, cooperation, professionalism, and other aspects of organizational life. The distinctive characteristic of a phantom policy is the fact that it is perceived as having greater authority than can be clearly demonstrated by formal evidence.

An informal expectation, therefore, should be classified as a phantom policy if teachers or administrators feel obliged to follow it, believe that it is backed up by formal authorities, and act accordingly despite uncertainty about its source.

This distinction is essential since the same practice may have different meanings for teachers and principals. One may perceive it as a guideline while another considers it to be a requirement. An experienced teacher may believe that a certain procedure has always been the school rule while a novice administrator may not be able to identify this procedure in the current policy documents. Therefore, the findings suggest that phantom policies should be distinguished from regular informal organizational practices on the basis of the following three elements: the perceived obligation to comply, the attribution of authority to support, and the uncertainty of formal authorization.

Perceived Obligation

The first element of distinction deals with the way in which employees perceive organizational expectations that appear to be informal. A casual suggestion does not necessarily have to be a phantom policy. Such a policy emerges when employees believe that they are required to comply. Perceptions of obligation may be based on various organizational realities. For instance, employees may consider vague directives as non-negotiable requirements because they realize that ignoring them would be viewed negatively and/or punished. The findings show that participants often used terms such as “we have to”, “administration expects that”, “everybody knows this”, “this is the way we do things here”, etc. in order to denote their expectations. Therefore, they perceived certain obligations not only in terms of personal preference but also in terms of organizational requirements.

The degree to which employees consider such expectations to be obligatory may vary considerably. For instance, some may perceive a requirement as absolute while others will comply only conditionally. Finally, employees may also fail to distinguish between what they are allowed to do and what they are obliged to do.

Attributed Authority

The second element of distinction refers to the way in which employees attribute authority to an organizational expectation. Teachers may believe that a requirement originates from the

principal, the administration, another school leader, an external authority, or another unspecified source. The findings indicate that the perceived source of an expectation may have changed several times during its development. Therefore, the original source of an informal requirement, which is perceived by employees as a phantom policy, may no longer be recognized or even remembered.

This finding is significant because it shows that the perceived authority of an expectation is not always supported by verifiable evidence. The belief that an organizational requirement originates from an authoritative source may be attributed to the fact that a requirement is linked to an authoritative position. Employees may believe that a requirement is legitimate and obligatory simply because it originates from somebody who occupies a formally legitimate position in terms of organizational hierarchy. This observation corresponds with the Webersian notion of authority as a type of power that is based on the belief that a particular individual, group, or institution has a right to make decisions and enforce them. Therefore, organizational actors may use the legitimacy of a certain position or title and use it in order to gain compliance with their expectations. Employees may perceive such expectations as requirements that have formal support simply because they originate from a figure that they believe to have such support. Thus, the perception of a requirement as an obligation is not based on objective evidence but rather on subjectivity, which is related to the perceived power and legitimacy of its source.

An expectation may, therefore, acquire practical authority simply because it is believed to have been issued by an authority, regardless of whether this belief is objectively true or not. In this way, employees may be guided by the idea that “the principal requires it”. The collective perception of this idea, therefore, may lead these employees to view this expectation as an organizational requirement. In fact, they may believe that this expectation has formal authority simply because they attribute this authority to the principal.

Uncertain Formal Authorization

The third element of distinction deals with the issue of formal authorization. A phantom policy may either have no source at all or its source may no longer be valid or clearly defined. In some cases, an expectation does not originate from any formal organizational source. In other cases, it may originate from a source that no longer exists or that is difficult to identify or verify.

This does not necessarily mean that the source was intentionally hidden. On the contrary, the organization may not remember that this expectation was ever supported formally. This is an important observation since it is linked to the authorization-memory gap, which was discussed in detail in the previous chapter.

Emergence of Phantom Policies

The findings emphasize the fact that a phantom policy may originate from multiple sources rather than from one. Ambiguous communication, organizational memories, informal exchange of information, misunderstandings, and beliefs about the authorization of an expectation may all be involved in the emergence process of a phantom policy. An informal requirement may be attributed to the principal, but the source of this requirement may no longer exist. On the other hand, an expectation could have been issued by an authoritative figure, but its source was not officially recognized at several points in the development process. Therefore, the

emergence of a phantom policy is not necessarily the result of one specific process but rather several.

A phantom policy may originate from a relatively minor ambiguity. An administrator may hold a vague belief about the necessity of a practice without realizing that they consider it a requirement. For instance, a principal may believe that teachers should follow a certain procedure but have no clear recollection as to why this procedure should be followed or when it was introduced. Teachers, on the other hand, may interpret this practice differently. They may believe that this procedure should be followed simply because it is the way things are done. If this belief becomes widespread among organizational members, the source of this ambiguity will eventually be forgotten.

Ambiguous Communication

Ambiguous communication is an important process through which phantom policies may originate or acquire credibility within school organizations. Organizational expectations are not always explicitly stated and communicated. Principals and other senior figures may advocate for particular practices, procedures, and behaviors, but they may communicate them as suggestions, guidelines, recommendations, and so on. Nevertheless, such communication will still be attributed authority by organizational members due to the fact that it originates from an authoritative source. For instance, a principal may communicate an expectation by saying that teachers “should” follow it rather than “must” or “have to”. The principal may have intended this communication to be viewed as a recommendation rather than a requirement. Teachers, however, may believe that this expectation was issued by an authoritative figure and should, therefore, be treated as an obligation. Additionally, repeated communication of the same practice may be involved in transforming this practice into an informal requirement.

Ambiguous communication can be reinforced by repeated exposure. Employees may perceive repeated exposure to information as evidence that what they are told is a requirement. They may also forget about the initial phrasing and context of this information. As a result, they may consider the repeated communication of this information to be proof that this practice should consistently be followed.

Therefore, in cases when a principal communicates clearly defined expectations to teachers, they will be perceived as recommendations. At the same time, when employees repeatedly hear about the same suggestions from their leader, they will eventually start to perceive them as obligations. The distinction that was initially recognized (i.e., recommendation versus requirement) will eventually be forgotten. In fact, teachers may believe that they must comply with this practice since they have been repeatedly told to do so. The original communication, therefore, will have undergone reinterpretation to fit the

requirements of organizational expectations. This illustrates how ambiguous communication can be the basis for a phantom policy.

Historical Practices

Historical practices constitute another important process through which phantom policies may originate within school organizations. An informal requirement may have existed in the past and may currently be considered obsolete. Nevertheless, this requirement may continue to be followed by organizational members. Existing teachers may communicate this practice to newer members as an established expectation, despite the fact that this expectation was never formally issued or was abandoned. Therefore, a phantom policy may originate from a historically established informal practice or requirement. The source of this practice may no longer exist or be recognized.

Organizational memory plays a significant role in this process. Newer members of the organization learn the practice from their more experienced colleagues. This means that they will perceive it as an established organizational requirement rather than as a historically established practice. Additionally, they may fail to recognize any source of this requirement. As a result, they will believe that this requirement has always existed. Nevertheless, they will be unable to distinguish between what used to be a requirement and what is currently a requirement.

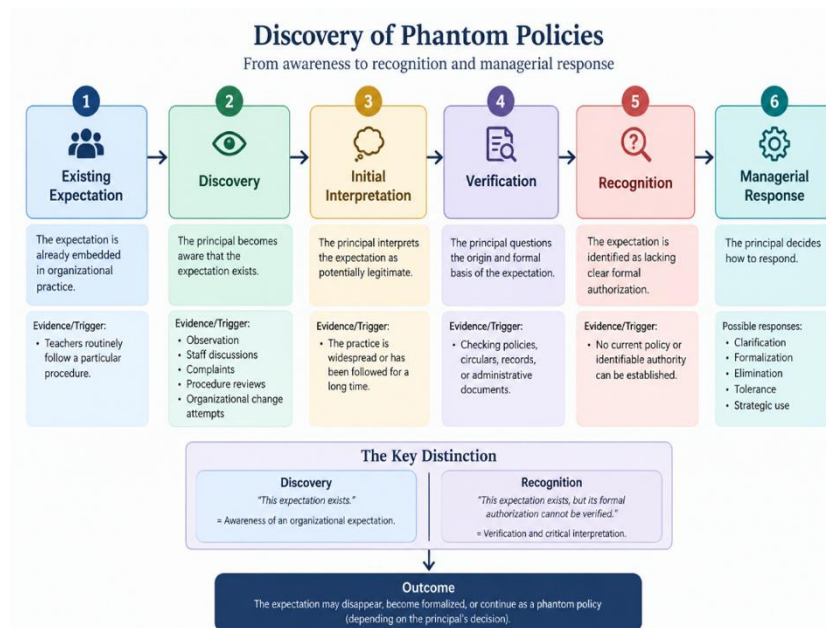
The findings show that teachers will continue to perform a practice long after its source is known to them, simply because they believe that they are supposed to do so. This belief will be generated by the fact that they have been told to follow this practice and that they continue to follow it. The source of this belief, however, will be attributed to organizational memory or to a perceived authority. Therefore, a phantom policy may arise out of a historically established informal practice simply because it is perceived to be an established requirement.

Informal Transmission

Phantom policies may originate from informal communication among teachers. Employees may refer to a certain expectation that supposedly has no source. Such an expectation has the potential to affect employees’ behavior if it is perceived as an established requirement. An employee may inform a colleague that a certain practice is supposed to be followed. The colleague may believe that this is a valid practice, especially if they assume that it has originated from somewhere. As a result, this expectation will be reinforced and will continue to be transmitted among employees. The belief in its validity will also increase as more and more employees mention it, simply because it will no longer be perceived as some kind of rumor. Instead, employees will believe that it has always been an expectation. Eventually, no one will be able to identify a source for this expectation, but they will continue to accept it as an organizational requirement.

Stage	Process	What Happens	Outcome
1. Initial Communication	Teacher-to-teacher communication	A teacher informs a colleague that a particular procedure is required.	An organizational expectation is introduced.
2. Acceptance	Colleague accepts the information	The colleague accepts the expectation because it appears consistent with existing practices.	The expectation gains initial credibility.
3. Repetition	Informal transmission	The expectation is communicated repeatedly to other teachers.	Its perceived credibility increases.

Stage	Process	What Happens	Outcome
4. Social Validation	Collective acceptance	Several employees begin to follow and discuss the practice.	The expectation becomes socially legitimized.
5. Normalization	Common organizational knowledge	Employees begin to treat the expectation as an established requirement.	The expectation becomes normalized.
6. Loss of Source	Original source becomes unclear	Employees can no longer identify who originally established the requirement.	Formal authorization becomes difficult to verify.
7. Phantom Policy	Continued behavioral influence	Employees continue following the expectation despite the absence of identifiable formal authorization.	An informal expectation functions as a phantom policy .



Discovery of Phantom Policies

The discovery of phantom policies represents a particularly important stage in the organizational life cycle of phantom policies because it marks the point at which organizational actors, particularly principals, become aware of expectations that have already formed and become embedded with everyday organizational practices.

A principal may realize the existence of a phantom policy through certain organizational activities, including observing teachers' behavior, reviewing administrative procedures, listening to staff complaints, discussing established practices with employees, or trying to introduce organizational changes. These activities may reveal that teachers are following particular procedures or expectations that the principal did not explicitly establish or may not recognize as formally authorized.

However, discovery does not necessarily mean that the principal immediately realizes the expectation as a phantom policy. The principal may initially assume that the expectation has a legitimate formal basis, particularly when it has been followed consistently by employees over an extended period. Its widespread acceptance within the organization may itself create an impression of institutional legitimacy.

This is an important analytical distinction between discovering a phantom policy and recognizing it as a phantom policy. Discovery

refers to the moment when an organizational actor becomes aware that a particular expectation exists and influences employee behavior. Recognition, on the other hand, involves a further process of questioning and examining the expectation's formal authorization, origin, and institutional legitimacy.

Thus, discovery is primarily a process of awareness, while recognition is a process of verification and interpretation. The distinction is significant because a principal may become aware of an organizational expectation without immediately challenging its legitimacy. Only when the expectation is examined against formal policies, administrative records, or other sources of authorization can its phantom nature become apparent.

The discovery stage therefore serves as a potential turning point in the life cycle of a phantom policy. Once a principal becomes aware of an unsupported expectation, the principal may ignore it, formally clarify it, eliminate it, or, in some circumstances, recognize its practical usefulness and strategically incorporate it into organizational management.

Discovery through Teacher Behavior

Principals may first encounter phantom policies through observable teacher behavior.

A principal may notice that teachers consistently perform a particular task, maintain a particular type of documentation, or

follow a particular procedure. When the principal asks why the practice exists, teachers may explain that “this is the rule” or that “the administration requires it.”

The principal may then investigate the origin of the practice.

Such situations illustrate that phantom policies can become visible through their behavioral consequences even when their formal basis remains invisible.

Discovery Through Organizational Communication

Principals may also discover phantom policies through conversations with teachers and other administrators. A teacher may raise a question about an apparently established requirement, or a department head may explain that a particular practice has traditionally been expected.

These conversations can reveal discrepancies between organizational beliefs and formal documentation. Discovery can therefore function as a turning point. Once the principal becomes aware of the discrepancy, the principal may clarify the expectation, ignore the discrepancy, formally establish the requirement, or strategically continue to rely upon the existing belief.

Discovery Through Organizational Change

Leadership transitions can be particularly important moments for identifying phantom policies.

A newly appointed principal may question practices inherited from a previous administration. Expectations that were previously treated as obvious may suddenly require explanation. Organizational change therefore exposes the historical foundations of informal expectations.

A new principal may discover that teachers are following practices that have no clear documentary basis. Whether those practices survive may depend on how the new leadership interprets and responds to them.

Believability and Perceived Legitimacy

The findings suggest that the effectiveness of a phantom policy depends substantially on its believability. Employees are more likely to comply when an expectation appears plausible, consistent with organizational culture, associated with legitimate authority, and supported by the behavior of colleagues.

Believability is therefore not simply a matter of whether an expectation is objectively true. It concerns whether employees have sufficient organizational evidence to regard the expectation as credible. Several mechanisms may strengthen this credibility. Administrative association can provide authority. Repetition can create familiarity. Peer compliance can provide social confirmation. Professional norms can make the expectation appear reasonable. Anticipated consequences can make compliance seem safer than questioning.

These mechanisms can collectively transform an uncertain expectation into a perceived organizational reality.

The Role of the Principal

The principal's position can substantially influence believability.

When an expectation is explicitly associated with the principal, teachers may regard it as more credible because the principal possesses recognized administrative authority.

This does not mean that teachers automatically accept every statement made by principals. Rather, the institutional position

creates a presumption of legitimacy that may reduce the perceived need for verification.

Peer Confirmation

Peer behavior can reinforce the perceived legitimacy of a phantom policy.

When teachers observe colleagues complying with an expectation, they may interpret that behavior as evidence that the requirement is genuine. This is especially important for new teachers who may lack knowledge of the school's formal administrative structure.

Peer conformity can therefore become a mechanism through which phantom policies reproduce themselves.

Professional Norms

An expectation is also more likely to become believable when it corresponds with existing professional norms.

If a phantom policy requires behavior that teachers already associate with responsible professional practice, employees may find little reason to question it.

The expectation can therefore gain legitimacy from professional identity even when its formal authorization is uncertain.

This finding reinforces the argument that organizational compliance cannot be explained solely through hierarchical authority.

Maintenance and Reproduction of Phantom Policies

Once a phantom policy becomes sufficiently believable, its continued existence depends upon processes of maintenance and reproduction. The findings indicate that phantom policies rarely survive simply because one individual continues to remember them. Instead, they are maintained through repeated communication, organizational routines, social confirmation, administrative reinforcement, and the behavior of employees who treat the expectation as established.

Maintenance is therefore a collective organizational process. An expectation that initially emerges from ambiguity can gradually become embedded in everyday organizational activity. As employees repeatedly encounter and reproduce the expectation, its original uncertainty becomes less visible.

The maintenance of a phantom policy can consequently be understood as a process through which belief is reproduced through behavior and behavior is reproduced through belief.

Repetition as a Mechanism of Maintenance

Repetition represents one of the most important mechanisms through which phantom policies acquire durability. When an expectation is repeatedly mentioned during meetings, communicated by colleagues, incorporated into routine practices, or reflected in administrative behavior, employees become increasingly familiar with it.

Familiarity can subsequently be interpreted as evidence of legitimacy.

An employee may initially question whether a requirement is official. However, if the same requirement is repeatedly encountered, the employee may eventually stop questioning its origin. The expectation becomes part of the background assumptions of organizational life.

Repetition therefore transforms an uncertain expectation into an apparently stable organizational practice.

The process can be expressed as:

Repetition → Familiarity → Reduced questioning → Normalization → Continued compliance

The importance of repetition lies in its ability to conceal the original uncertainty surrounding an expectation. The more frequently a practice is reproduced, the less visible its informal origins may become.

Social Reproduction

Phantom policies are also maintained through interactions among organizational members.

Teachers may explain organizational expectations to newly appointed colleagues, senior staff may advise less experienced teachers about “how things are done,” and department heads may reproduce administrative expectations within their respective units.

Through these interactions, employees become secondary transmitters of the phantom policy.

This process is particularly significant because the principal may eventually cease to be the primary source of the expectation. Once teachers themselves communicate the requirement, its authority may appear to originate from the organization as a whole rather than from an individual administrator.

The expectation consequently becomes socially distributed.

A teacher may hear the same requirement from several colleagues and conclude that the expectation must be legitimate because it is shared across the organization. The collective nature of the belief therefore strengthens its credibility.

Organizational Socialization

New employees are particularly important in the reproduction of phantom policies.

When teachers enter an established school, they must learn not only formal policies but also informal expectations concerning professional conduct, administrative procedures, communication, and organizational routines. Much of this knowledge is acquired from experienced colleagues.

If experienced employees present a phantom policy as an established organizational requirement, newcomers may accept it without independently verifying its formal basis.

The phantom policy is consequently transmitted across organizational generations.

This process allows an expectation to survive even when the individuals who originally encountered or created it are no longer present. The organization retains the practice through socialization even after its original source has disappeared.

Administrative Reinforcement

Administrative reinforcement can significantly strengthen a phantom policy.

A principal does not necessarily need to explicitly establish an expectation as formal policy. References to the expectation, questions about compliance, requests for evidence of compliance, or positive recognition of employees who follow it may be sufficient to reinforce its perceived importance.

Even relatively indirect administrative behavior can therefore increase the expectation’s legitimacy.

For example, if teachers already believe that a particular administrative practice is required and the principal repeatedly asks whether it has been completed, employees may interpret these questions as confirmation that the practice is officially mandatory.

The principal may consequently strengthen a phantom policy without issuing a formal directive.

Maintenance through Anticipated Consequences

Another important maintenance mechanism is the anticipation of consequences.

Teachers may comply with an expectation because they believe that failure to do so could attract criticism, reduce their professional standing, affect evaluations, or create conflict with administrators.

Importantly, the consequence does not necessarily need to occur.

The belief that a consequence might occur can be sufficient to maintain compliance.

This mechanism is consistent with the disciplinary dimension of the theoretical framework. Employees may regulate their own behavior because they anticipate that their conduct could be observed or evaluated. The phantom policy therefore becomes effective through anticipation rather than continuous direct enforcement.

The Role of Silence

Silence can also be a maintenance mechanism.

When employees choose not to question an expectation, others may interpret the absence of disagreement as a statement of organizational agreement. A teacher who is unsure of a requirement may choose not to voice any concern because colleagues seem to accept it.

This creates a positive feedback loop:

Uncertainty → silence → apparent consensus → increased belief → continued silence

Silence does not always signify agreement; it may reflect ambiguity, apprehension, lack of information, or beliefs that questioning the expectation would be inappropriate.

As a result, the apparent consensus of a phantom policy may sometimes exceed the reality of the consensus.

Institutionalization of Phantom Policies

Over time, a phantom policy may become institutionalized.

An expectation becomes institutionalized when it is sufficiently established that actors treat it as a given; the policy has become taken for granted. Employees may have difficulty recalling that the expectation was ever ambiguous; the distinction between “this is required” and “this is how we normally do it” may no longer be apparent.

This is a crucial point in the life cycle of a phantom policy. A teacher may ask, “Where did we get this from?” whereas after institutionalization the question may not be asked at all. The expectation has crossed the threshold from uncertain belief to unquestioned fact.

Loss of the Original Source

One of the most important characteristics of institutionalized phantom policies is the loss of the original source. While employees may remember the substance of the expectation, they may forget whether it originated in a formal regulation, a departed principal, a staff meeting, an administrative whim, or an unexamined assumption.

This creates what the present study will call the authorization-memory gap.

The organization remembers the expectation but has lost the knowledge about its authorization. The longer that an expectation survives; the more difficult it can be for employees to reconstruct its origins. This can render the expectation highly resistant to scrutiny because employees may believe that its very longevity is a form of authorization.

Maintenance through Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is also a potential mechanism of maintenance.

Schools develop shared understandings concerning what it means to be a responsible teacher, an acceptable administrator, a properly documented employee, a committed professional, and a loyal employee. Phantom policies that are consonant with these understandings are likely to be durable.

An expectation that seems perfectly consistent with the culture of the school may not be viewed as strange at all; employees may accept it without scrutinizing its authorization. Organizational culture, then, can provide the context for normalization of phantom policies. At the same time, cultural differences between schools could explain why an identical phantom policy might be highly effective in one organization and completely inert in another.

Maintenance without Deliberate Manipulation

The findings also suggest that one should not assume that maintenance always reflects deliberate manipulation on the part of principals.

A phantom policy may be sustained because employees reproduce it. A principal may simply inherit an established expectation and believe that it is legitimate; a department head may repeat a historical practice because it is institutionally necessary; and a teacher may share it with new employees because she believes that it is an official policy.

The policy then can be maintained through ordinary processes without a conscious attempt to mislead.

This distinction is crucial in this study because it differentiates the existence of a phantom policy from the intentions of the actors that sustain it.

Transition toward Strategic Leverage

When the expectation has already been firmly established in the school, it can potentially be strategically leveraged for managing employees. At this stage, the teachers may accept it as a valid policy, although there may not be an actual document supporting it. As the teachers accept this expectation, the principal may realize that it can be used to motivate teachers.

This transition from being an accepted phantom policy to strategic leverage does not necessarily happen suddenly. There is a process, when the principal realizes that the teachers have accepted a certain behaviour, and it is convenient for them to use this belief to motivate other employees to follow specific behaviors.

For instance, when the teachers believe that they must submit the lesson plans in a specific format, while no written policy requires it, the principal can use this to encourage the teachers to prepare more detailed plans. By reminding the teachers about the necessity of following this particular format, the principal may successfully motivate them to change their behavior, relying on their existing belief.

At this point, the principal does not need to develop a new phantom policy – they just need to use the existing one, based on the teachers' belief in it. The principal can use the already existing expectations in various ways, depending on their own intentions. They may openly refer to it, remind the teachers of this expectation, reinforce it, or just use it as a motivation whenever they need employees to follow this particular behavior. At times, the principal may not formally confirm it, simply letting the teachers believe that this rule has been legitimately established. This transition of the phantom policy from being an unsubstantiated rule to the belief in it among the employees, which the principal can use to motivate employees, is strategically leveraged.

Strategic Leverage of Phantom Policies

The process of strategic leveraging refers to cases, when the principal uses the existing phantom policy to motivate teachers' behaviors. The key characteristic of strategic leverage is the recognition by the principal that the existing unsubstantiated rule can be used to encourage specific behaviors among the teachers.

The phantom policy may have strong support among the teachers, who may believe that it has been legitimately established. The teachers may have heard this rule from other employees, previous principals, senior teachers, or other sources. They may believe that the rule has been legitimately established, without checking whether or not it is actually supported by any official documents

After the teachers' belief in this particular phantom policy is firmly established, the principal may find it helpful, when motivating them towards behaviors that correspond to this expectation.

When the principal needs to encourage teachers to stay at the school until a specific time every day, while there is no official rule requiring it, they may remind them of the expectation of staying until this particular time. As the teachers believe in the legitimacy of this rule, they will comply, without attempting to verify whether this rule has ever been officially established.

As seen in this example, the strategic leverage can make the process of management significantly simpler. By using the teachers' beliefs to motivate them towards specific behaviors, the principal does not need to develop and formally establish a new phantom policy. They just need to rely on the existing rule that the teachers believe in.

Strategic leverage relies on the existing beliefs about the phantom policy. The principal does not formally establish their authority – instead, they use the belief in the existence of this authority to motivate employees.

This does not necessarily mean that the principal intentionally abuses the beliefs of the teachers to motivate them towards unwanted behaviors. While in some cases the phantom policy is used for malicious intents, in others the principal simply finds that an existing belief can be beneficial for achieving their goals. The principal can strategically leverage the existing unsubstantiated

rule, when they recognize that it can help them achieve their intentions.

The principal may also selectively apply the belief in a phantom policy. If they want to encourage teachers towards certain behaviors, they may refer to an unsubstantiated rule, while in other cases – avoid it.

Therefore, the strategic leverage is a significant transition in the life cycle of a phantom policy. While it has previously been simply an unsubstantiated assumption, the principal can now use it to motivate employees.

Leveraging Existing Beliefs

The effectiveness of strategic leveraging depends substantially on the volume of teachers' belief in a particular phantom policy. When they have weak belief in it, the principal will have limited leverage. However, if they firmly believe in the legitimacy of the specific rule, the principal may only need to briefly mention it to encourage them towards the desired behavior.

If the teachers believe that the report must be submitted every Friday and no one will comment on it otherwise, the principal can just remind them: "The Friday report should be submitted as usual." They do not need to explain the reasons for this requirement and prove that the report should indeed be submitted every Friday – the teacher will simply comply with this request.

As this example shows, strategic leveraging relies on the difference between formally established authority and the perceived authority. The former refers to the powers explicitly granted to the leader by the rules, policies, laws, regulations, or other established documents. The latter refers to the belief that one party has in the authority of the other one, regardless of whether or not this belief is substantiated.

The phantom policies primarily rely on perceived authority. The employees may believe that the leader has the authority to make these rules, regardless of whether or not they actually have it. As a result, the leader can rely on perceived authority to motivate employees towards desired behaviors.

The principal can take advantage of the perceived authority and leverage it to encourage the employees to follow specific rules. They do not need to formally establish a new rule – they just need to rely on the belief that it has always existed.

The effectiveness of this approach may also depend on the length of the phantom policy's existence and the level of its establishment within the school. The longer it has existed and the stronger its established presence is, the more difficult it will be for the employees to question its legitimacy and origin.

When new teachers arrive at the school, they may receive information from their colleagues about the expectations of the principal. They will believe that these rules have always been in place, simply because they have been repeatedly told so by senior employees. It will also help the principal leverage the perceived authority, by leveraging the communication methods that reinforce the belief in this authority. Statements such as "This has always been required," "Everybody expects this to be done," or "That's the way we do things around here" will help reinforce the belief in an unsubstantiated phantom policy.

As a result, an informal belief in an undocumented rule can gradually acquire substantial power among the employees. The principal does not need to rely on extensive formal authority to

motivate them – instead, they can simply refer to the commonly established rule, which they can leverage to encourage employees to follow specific behaviors.

Therefore, the process of strategic leveraging represents a significant transition in the life cycle of the phantom policy. Initially firmly established as a rule within the school, it can be leveraged by the principal to motivate employees to follow specific behaviors. The principal will be able to achieve their intents without the need to formally establish a new rule. Instead, they will rely on the existing belief in this rule to encourage employees to modify their behaviors.

Selective Reinforcement

Strategic leverage can also involve selective reinforcement.

A principal may selectively emphasize a certain phantom policy in order to obtain a particular behavioral outcome while not necessarily mentioning it in other contexts. The expectation therefore is a flexible tool for managerial influence.

The very flexibility of phantom policies can make them appealing to administrators because they can be invoked without going through the process of establishing or changing formal institutional policy.

However, selective reinforcement can also lead to perceptions of unfairness if teachers recognize that the same expectation is being applied differently to different people.

Strategic Ambiguity

Sometimes, ambiguity can be a strength.

A clearly worded rule establishes definite boundaries; employees know what is expected, can question the legitimacy of the expectation, and potentially appeal the application of the rule. An ambiguous expectation creates less certainty about the boundaries. If employees believe that the principal has the authority to interpret the expectation, the ambiguity can give the principal more discretion.

Strategic leverage therefore can work with a combination of perceived authority and ambiguity. The principal does not necessarily have to state exactly what the organization expects; employees may attempt to read the principal's expectations and regulate their own behavior accordingly.

Phantom Policies as Low-Cost Management Technology

The findings suggest that phantom policies can be a form of low-cost management technology.

A formal policy typically requires authorization, documentation, communication, implementation, and potentially monitoring. A phantom policy can sometimes influence behavior without these processes because the organizational belief already exists.

The principal can therefore gain the behavioral benefits of a formal policy by relying on an existing expectation.

This does not mean that phantom policies are always efficient or desirable; the benefits of their use may be accompanied by uncertainty, mistrust, unnecessary work, or organizational conflict.

Nevertheless, this technology can be powerful in the hands of a manager.

Conditions for Strategic Effectiveness

Strategic leverage is more likely to be effective when employees have great trust in administrative authority, organizational

communication is informal, the expectation is widespread, formal policy information is difficult to obtain, and the potential costs of noncompliance are viewed as significant.

Strategic leverage is less likely to be effective when teachers have easy access to official policy documents, the organizational communication is transparent, employees are comfortable with questioning administrative decisions, and formal procedures exist for resolving ambiguity.

The effectiveness of a given phantom policy is likely to be situational rather than universal.

Boundaries of Strategic Leverage

Strategic leverage also carries risks for principals.

If teachers discover that an expectation lacks formal authorization, the principal's credibility may be harmed. Employees may begin to question other administrative requirements, undermining the principal's overall legitimacy.

A phantom policy can therefore produce short-term compliance while simultaneously undermining long-term organizational trust.

This is a fundamental tension in the concept of phantom policy as a management tool: the same ambiguity that can create managerial flexibility can also damage institutional credibility when the lack of formal support becomes apparent.

The findings presented in this section show that phantom policies can be maintained through repetition, social reinforcement, organizational socialization, administrative reinforcement, anticipated consequences, silence, institutionalization, and organizational culture. Employees may lose awareness of the uncertain origins of an expectation while maintaining strong belief in its authorization; the resulting authorization-memory gap allows the expectation to survive despite a lack of formal evidence or clarity. Once established, a phantom policy may then be available for strategic leverage. Principals can leverage existing organizational beliefs to obtain teacher compliance without necessarily creating new formal rules. Strategic leverage can work through selective reinforcement, perceived authority, ambiguity, and employee self-regulation.

The next section will examine teacher responses to phantom policies, particularly compliance, adaptation, negotiation, questioning, resistance, and situations in which employees challenge or abandon unsupported organizational expectations.

Teacher Responses to Phantom Policies

Teacher responses represent a crucial stage in the life cycle of phantom policies because the effectiveness of an unsupported organizational expectation ultimately depends on how employees respond to it. A phantom policy does not always produce compliance merely because it is communicated or believed to be legitimate. Teachers may accept it, comply with it, adapt to it, negotiate it, question it, or actively resist it.

The response of teachers therefore depends on the interaction between perceived authority, organizational culture, professional identity, anticipated consequences, peer behavior, and access to formal information. The same phantom policy may produce complete compliance among some teachers while sparking doubt or resistance in others.

Compliance through Perceived Legitimacy

The most direct response to a phantom policy is compliance. Teachers may comply because they believe that the expectation is formally authorized.

In this case, compliance does not necessarily involve coercion; the teacher accepts the belief that the expectation is legitimate and incorporates it into normal professional behavior.

This is an important mechanism because it shows that formal authorization and perceived authorization can produce similar results. To the teacher, an expectation may be practically indistinguishable from a formal policy if its perceived authorization is sufficiently strong.

The teacher therefore responds to the perceived authorization rather than the objective authorization.

Compliance under Uncertainty

Teachers may comply with an expectation just because they are not sure whether it is authorized. The risk of violating an expectation may outweigh the cost of precautionary compliance. For instance, a teacher may not know whether a policy requirement is included in the school's policy. However, the teacher may assume that refusal would be criticized by the principal. Under these conditions, the most prudent decision is to comply with a potential rule.

A teacher's reasoning may look like this: "I am not sure whether this is an official rule, but it seems better to comply."

As a result, a mechanism emerges:

Uncertainty + perceived risk → precautionary compliance

Thus, precautionary compliance makes it possible for a phantom policy to have an impact on teachers' activities even if the origin of the expectation is unknown or cannot be retrieved.

Compliance through Peer Conformity

In addition to the mechanisms described above, another source of influence on teachers is represented by their perceptions of peer behavior. By observing how other teachers act, a teacher may form an idea of what is normal in the workplace, which in turn can affect their own behavior. To a considerable extent, this is due to the fact that teachers have limited access to the source of organizational information. Thus, a phantom policy gains ground by affecting the perceptions of individual employees, after which they become supporters of this policy, believing in its normativity.

For example, if a school administration requires the preparation of reports on a regular basis, but no official documents confirm this, then a teacher may adopt this requirement as a fact just because other employees treat it as such. In this vein, the mechanism driving the growth of a phantom policy may function as follows: The more employees perform an activity → the more this activity looks like the norm to other employees → the more likely the behavior of an individual employee will be adjusted to align with this activity

Furthermore, if other teachers treat an expectation as legitimate, then an individual teacher may perceive non-conformity as uncomfortable. Therefore, to avoid such a situation, a teacher may adjust their behavior to match that of their peers, thereby becoming a supporter of the phantom policy.

Professional Identity and Compliance

Another mechanism by which a phantom policy may gain ground is based on professional identity and the desire to conform to the

image of a responsible educator. In particular, there is a perception among teachers that a responsible teacher always obeys the requirements of the school administration. This phantom policy mechanism rests on the association between the role of a teacher and specific conduct that is presented as obligatory for an employee who wishes to regard themselves as a responsible and conscientious educator. Thus, compliance with a phantom policy derives from an individual's desire to see themselves as a responsible educator and avoid the image of a non-compliant, sloppy, and unprofessional teacher. Accordingly, the mechanism through which compliance with a phantom policy takes place in this case is as follows: Phantom policy → threat to professional identity → desire to avoid this threat → compliance

The key point is that teachers are not always controlled directly by the school administration. Thus, an important contribution to understanding the phenomenon of phantom policies is the fact that when certain expectations gain ground among teachers, employees exercise control over themselves.

Adaptation Rather Than Full Compliance

Sometimes, teachers simply adapt their behavior to a phantom policy without accepting it as legitimate. Such a position can be referred to as adaptation. Thus, adaptation is a phenomenon that lies between full compliance and resistance. Accordingly, a teacher who adapts will modify their behavior in accordance with an unsupported regulation just to avoid negative consequences. At the same time, however, such a teacher does not recognize this regulation as legitimate.

For instance, a teacher may perform a specific activity just to avoid the criticism of the school administration even though they do not consider this activity necessary. Thus, behavioral compliance is achieved without internal acceptance of the regulation. This nuance is crucial and must be borne in mind when researching phantom policies. In other words, a behavioral response on the part of the teacher does not always indicate acceptance of the regulation. There is a need to differentiate between behavioral and internal compliance. Behavioral compliance means that a teacher is following the requirements of the phantom policy, but internally, they do not accept this regulation. Internal compliance, conversely, implies that the teacher genuinely believes that the regulation is legitimate.

Negotiation of Meaning

In an attempt to interpret an unsupported regulation, teachers sometimes seek to clarify the regulation's meaning. In other words, when faced with confusing information coming from the management, teachers may attempt to negotiate the meaning of a regulation. Teachers can seek clarification from management or negotiate the regulation among themselves. To do this, they may ask for specific instructions — for instance, what precisely they should do, when they should do it, and what consequences they will incur if they fail to do so.

This kind of negotiation can be interpreted as the emergence of a social process aimed at comprehending the regulation and negotiating its meaning. Thus, when faced with an unsupported regulation, teachers do not simply accept it or resist it — they engage in a discussion of what this regulation means. A concrete example would be a situation where, upon learning of a new reporting procedure to which they must adhere, teachers do not consider the matter closed simply because they have received no written instructions. Accordingly, they will discuss this

requirement one with another while also turning to the school administration to find out exactly what this procedure entails.

It is essential to recognize that such negotiations can have two outcomes. On the one hand, these discussions can lead to the regulation receiving more credibility — for example, because teachers believe that the regulation's meaning has now been clarified. On the other hand, however, they can reveal the regulation's lack of legitimacy — for instance, because there is no basis for it.

Consequently, such negotiations can strengthen a phantom policy or weaken it depending on the outcome.

Questioning and Verification

Sometimes, in an effort to reveal the lack of legitimacy on the part of a phantom policy, teachers deliberately question its authenticity. In particular, they may look for information that would disprove an unsupported regulation. For instance, teachers may examine organizational regulations and instructions in search of information that would refute the regulation. They may also look for the document confirming the regulation or the authority that formulated it. This process of verifying the facts is crucial in order to distinguish between beliefs about the regulation and the reality of its origin.

For example, having learned of a requirement that one must participate in a particular type of training, teachers may verify whether this training is indicated in the school's regulations. Upon doing so, they may find that this training is not specified anywhere and verify that this expectation is not legitimate. In this case, the mechanism by which a change in attitudes towards a phantom policy takes place can be represented as follows:

Verification → uncertainty → reconsideration of the legitimacy of a regulation

Thus, the availability of information enabling one to verify the validity of a regulation can play a vital role in the decline of a phantom policy.

Resistance

Resistance emerges when teachers reject a regulation in which they do not see legitimacy.

Resistance can take many forms: from direct opposition to a phantom policy on the part of one or several teachers to covert resistance measures. For instance, in the face of an unsupported regulation, a teacher may demand official confirmation of this regulation, ask the principal to explain the rationale behind it, or bring this issue up for discussion with their peers.

Alternatively, a teacher may reduce their voluntary compliance with a phantom policy or behave strictly in accordance with documented regulations without going beyond them in any way. Resistance can therefore take both direct and indirect forms.

For instance, in an open confrontation with the principal, a teacher may state that a regulation does not appear in the school's regulations. Another teacher, however, may refuse to comply with an unsupported regulation outright unless they receive formal confirmation of it from the school administration. The emergence of resistance demonstrates that phantom policies are not permanent fixtures.

Accordingly, the ability of a phantom policy to influence employees will be limited by the emergence of resistance. When

resistance takes place, teachers are no longer willing to accept the regulation.

As a result, the legitimacy of this regulation and accordingly its ability to withstand scrutiny are undermined.

Collective Resistance

Individual resistance is often ineffective. If one teacher challenges a phantom policy, this may not have a significant impact. However, if the same regulation is questioned by several teachers, this gives way to collective resistance and a fundamental reassessment of the legitimacy of this regulation. To illustrate: when teachers begin to discuss an unsupported regulation and ask where it originates, they may discover that, in fact, no document confirms this regulation. The collective examination of a phantom policy enables its participants to identify its lack of legitimacy.

This in turn allows them to pose more meaningful questions to the school administration: Does this regulation actually exist? Who formulated it? Does this regulation have any documentation to support it? Why must we comply with it?

In other words, the emergence of collective resistance is associated with the social mechanisms that were previously responsible for strengthening the position of a phantom policy. However, collective resistance enables teachers to reassess this regulation and therefore undermines its legitimacy.

The peer approval process can support phantom policies, but it can also work against them by enabling resistance to emerge. Teachers' communication can lead to either the reinforcement of an unsupported regulation, or resistance and reconsideration of this regulation.5.10.10 Fear or Silence

Resistance may however be constrained by fear.

Teachers may believe that challenging an administrative expectation can have negative effects on their relationship with the principal, professional evaluation, workload allocation, promotion possibilities, and workplace relationships. Even when employees doubt the legitimacy of a phantom policy, they may therefore remain silent. Silence should consequently not be automatically interpreted as acceptance.

A silent teacher may comply because the expectation is believed to be legitimate, because the teacher is unsure, because colleagues comply, or because challenging the requirement is too risky.

Understanding these different motivations is essential for interpreting observed compliance.

Differential Responses among Teachers

Teachers are unlikely to respond identically to the same phantom policy.

Differences in experience, organizational position, confidence, professional knowledge, and access to information, relationship with administrators and familiarity with formal regulations may influence the responses.

Experienced teachers may have stronger knowledge of organizational history and therefore realize that an expectation has no formal basis. Newly appointed teachers may be more dependent on colleagues for organizational information and therefore more likely to accept informal expectations.

Similarly, teachers with stronger confidence in their professional autonomy may be more willing to question unsupported requirements. Phantom

Policies therefore operate in differentiated organizational relationships rather than affecting all employees equally.

Conditions under Which Phantom Policies Are Challenged

A phantom policy is more vulnerable when employees obtain reliable evidence that contradicts its presumed authority. Challenge is also more likely when the expectation involves significant workload, appears unfair, contradicts professional standards, is inconsistently enforced, generates visible negative consequences, or exceeds legitimate administrative authority.

In such circumstances the cost of compliance may outweigh the perceived benefit of avoiding conflict. The balance between perceived legitimacy and perceived cost therefore represents an important determinant of teacher response.

Conditions under Which Phantom Policies Collapse

A phantom policy may collapse when its underlying belief system loses credibility.

This can occur when its formal basis is explicitly disproven, when a new administrator rejects the expectation, when teachers collectively cease to reproduce it, when contradictory official instructions become available, or when selective enforcement reveals its arbitrary nature.

The collapse of a phantom policy illustrates that institutionalization is not necessarily permanent.

Institutionalized expectations can only be powerful so long as organizational actors continue to reproduce them.

Once reproduction ceases, the expectation may quickly lose its practical authority.

Conditions Affecting the Effectiveness of Phantom Policies

Analysis shows that the impact of phantom policies on the behavior of organizational members is not uniform. Its effectiveness depends on a number of accompanying conditions. These conditions can make the unsupported claim weak and dubious or give it significant informal authority.

A phantom policy is more efficient when teachers perceive the authority of the person putting forward the claim as legitimate, when information coming from administration is ambiguous, and when social consensus prevails in the organization. Access to formal information, critical thinking, and professional independence to some extent deprives such a policy of efficiency.

Strength of Perceived Authority

The perception of the authority of the person issuing requirements is one of the factors associated with the emergence and growth of phantom policies. When teachers perceive an employee who expresses expectations as being in a position of formal authority, phantom policy acquires strength and becomes more efficient. Teachers may perceive such statements as generally binding, even when there is no official policy supporting them.

For example, if the principal calls for action to be taken, this call is perceived by teachers as an order derived from the superior position of the leader. In fact, it may be based on nothing but a phantom policy. Given the superior position of the principal, this expectation receives informal authority.

Thus, the perceived authority of the person issuing requirements can be more influential than the formal basis for these requirements.

Degree of Formal Ambiguity

When official regulations are ambiguous, phantom policies emerge and develop more rapidly. Ambiguity of this type can be caused by outdated, inconsistent, inaccessible, or poorly worded official policies. In the face of insufficient information, teachers may seek to answer paralinguistic questions through unofficial channels. This especially applies to ambiguous points in the regulation that do not specifically indicate the required behavior.

For example, if teachers do not have clear guidelines for submitting reports to the principal, a phantom policy may arise among them. In their search for guidance on what to do, teachers share information and experience, believing that they are consulting official resources. If, for example, they come to an agreement on particular terms, then they will continue to follow these terms, believing that they are standardized.

Thus, formal ambiguity expands the space for the development of phantom policies. The more teachers feel uncertainty regarding formal regulations, the more opportunities there are for the emergence of phantom policies.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture plays an important role in the emergence and growth of phantom policies. If organizational members perceive strict hierarchical superiority and accept it as a given, then phantom policies have more opportunities for development and informal authority. By contrast, critical thinking and professionalism reduce the impact of such policies.

For example, if it is acceptable for teachers to question the decisions of the principal, then phantom policies will fail to gain authority. On the contrary, if questioning the superior is not in the culture of the school, then the presence of a phantom policy will function for much longer. Thus, organizational culture acts as a filter through which teachers' readiness to accept a phantom policy is expressed. A critical attitude towards decisions made and the absence of cult-like adherence to the instructions of the superior opens up opportunities for critical analysis of each phantom policy.

Social Consensus

The number of people supporting an unsupported claim also affects its impact. Thus, a phantom policy rarely emerges and prevails when only one teacher adheres to it. By contrast, wide social consensus gives such a policy much more strength and informal authority. The more teachers adhere to a particular unsubstantiated requirement, the more often they will perceive it as a generally binding rule.

For example, if a phantom policy prevails among the majority of teachers, then new employees will accept it as an official rule. This is especially true for those moments in which social consensus among teachers indicate strict compliance with regulatory requirements.

Thus, social consensus can give a phantom policy wide informal authority. In the face of social adherence, even the most unsubstantiated requirements may seem legitimate and generally binding.

Visibility of Enforcement

The visibility of enforcement measures also affects the impact of a phantom policy. If the organizational members who are the target audience for the requirements clearly see that they will be sanctioned for non-compliance with them, then the efficiency of such a policy increases. This especially applies to the visibility of enforcement tools in the early stages of the implementation of a phantom policy.

For example, if teachers know that the principal monitors compliance with the requirements of a phantom policy, then they will be more likely to follow these requirements. However, in the later stages of acceptance and implementation, explicit supervision of teachers' activities may not be necessary.

Thus, phantom policies are efficient both through explicit enforcement and implicit group enforcement.

Access to Formal Information

Access to the sources of official information allows organizational members to compare phantom policies with existing regulations. If no official document confirms a particular decision, this may weaken its authority. On the contrary, the absence of such sources allows phantom policies to prevail. In particular, access to information from external official sources (various normative acts) also reduces the efficiency of phantom policies.

For example, if teachers know that certain requirements are not explicitly stated in any official document, this may arouse skepticism. Thus, the emergence of phantom policies is inhibited when organizational members have access to official information.

Organizational Stability and Historical Continuity

The stability of a phantom policy and its historical continuity also affect its efficiency. Thus, teachers adhere to the requirements of a policy that has lasted for a long time more consistently. In addition, they perceive this policy as more legitimate since it has stood the test of time.

For example, if teachers have used a particular procedure for ten years, then new employees will adopt it without hesitation. The longer a phantom policy prevails, the more organizational members adhere to it. Therefore, one of the ways to increase the efficiency of a phantom policy is to ensure its stability over time. This can be done, for example, by maintaining the policy in different administrations. The longer a phantom policy exists, the more often it is perceived as a generally binding rule.

Consequences of Phantom Policies

The consequences of phantom policies can be positive and negative for the organization and its members. In particular, such policies have advantages and disadvantages for the principal and teachers. These consequences are associated with the characteristics of the requirements themselves, their acceptance, and the accompanying conditions. In general, phantom policies can simplify the work of the principal but bring teachers some inconveniences and difficulties.

Increased Compliance

One of the most direct consequences of a phantom policy is increased compliance with its requirements. Since the requirements are often perceived as legitimate, teachers change their behavior to align with them. The principal, in turn, achieves the desired organizational consequences without the need to develop an official policy.

For example, if teachers believe that a particular report must be submitted to the principal every week, then they will adhere to this requirement. Thus, the principal can obtain regular information without developing an official document regarding this issue.

In terms of organizational management, phantom policies can be an easy way to regulate the behavior of organizational members. However, this does not always mean that these members accept the requirements of the phantom policy.

Reduced Autonomy

One of the negative consequences of widely held phantom policies is reduced autonomy of teachers. In particular, if there are many expectations that are not supported by official documents, then teachers may act more conservative. Substituting professional judgment for speculation about the intentions of the principal can erode trust and professionalism. For example, not asking the question “What does the principal want me to do?” but “What is professional in this situation?” can free the teacher from inappropriate moral accountability.

When teachers feel uncertainty about their behavior in the face of ambiguous official documents, then it is easier for phantom policies to emerge. This, in turn, leads to reduced autonomy and professional responsibility. Thus, phantom policies can have negative consequences for the development of professional culture in an organization.

Discussion

Introduction

This chapter interprets the findings described in Chapter 5 in terms of the theoretical perspectives and organizational literature described in Chapters 2 and 3. The purpose of the discussion is to explain what they mean theoretically and organizationally as opposed to simply restating the findings. Particular attention is given to the relationship between formal authority and perceived authority, the transformation of ambiguity into organizational expectations, the institutionalization of unsupported rules, and the ability of principals to use existing organizational beliefs as instruments of managerial influence.

The central argument emerging from the analysis is that phantom policies represent a distinctive form of informal governance. They occupy an intermediate position between formal organizational rules and ordinary informal norms. Unlike formal policies they lack a clearly identifiable institutional authorization. Unlike ordinary informal norms however, they are often perceived by employees as mandatory or officially sanctioned. Their organizational power therefore originates not primarily from formal authorization but from a combination of interpretation, legitimacy, repetition, social confirmation, and authority attribution.

The findings demonstrate that phantom policies can emerge unintentionally from ambiguity, historical practices, organizational assumptions, and informal communication. Once established, they can be reproduced through organizational socialization and routine behavior. Over time, repeated acceptance can transform an uncertain expectation into a taken-for-granted organizational reality. At that stage, principals may discover that the expectation can be used strategically to influence teacher behavior.

The discussion therefore develops the proposition that phantom policies transform organizational ambiguity into informal managerial power.

Phantom Policies as Informal Governance

The findings suggest that phantom policies should be regarded as mechanisms of informal governance rather than simply misunderstandings or communication failures. Governance within organizations does not only occur through formally documented rules. Employees are also guided by assumptions concerning what they are expected to do, what administrators consider appropriate, and what consequences may follow from particular forms of behavior.

Phantom policies are significant because they occupy a distinctive position within this informal governance structure. An informal norm may be recognized as a customary practice without being mistaken for formal policy. A phantom policy on the other hand is characterized by uncertainty concerning its official status combined with a sufficiently strong perception of obligation.

This distinction is theoretically important. If an employee knows that a practice is merely customary, the employee may have greater discretion in deciding whether to follow it. If the same practice is believed to be a formal requirement, the perceived cost of noncompliance becomes substantially greater.

The phantom policy therefore derives its influence from the perception that an expectation possesses institutional authority even when that authority cannot be demonstrated. The findings further indicate that governance through phantom policies can occur without continuous direct intervention from the principal. Once employees accept the expectation, they may regulate their own behavior. The organization therefore becomes governed partly through beliefs about rules rather than just rules.

This finding strengthens the study's conceptual distinction between formal authorization and practical legitimacy. An expectation may lack formal authorization while having considerable practical legitimacy among organizational members.

Phantom Policies and Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory provides an important explanation for why unsupported expectations can survive and become organizationally significant.

The findings demonstrate a gradual movement from uncertainty towards institutionalization. An expectation may initially arise through an ambiguous instruction, historical practice, informal communication, or organizational assumption. At the beginning, employees may be uncertain about whether the expectation is genuinely required. Repeated exposure however, increases familiarity. Social confirmation then strengthens the belief that the expectation represents established organizational practice. Eventually, employees may stop questioning its origin.

This process corresponds closely with institutionalization. Organizational practices become powerful not necessarily since their formal justification is continually demonstrated, but because organizational actors reproduce them until they appear natural and self-evident. The concept of the authorization-memory gap provides a particularly useful extension of this institutional perspective. Over time, organizational actors may retain collective memory of what employees are expected to do while losing reliable memory concerning why the expectation exists or who

formally authorized it. The expectation survives while its authorization disappears from organizational memory.

This creates an important paradox. Institutionalization typically provides stability to organizational practices, but in the case of phantom policies, institutionalization can stabilize practices whose formal foundations are uncertain.

The findings therefore suggest that institutionalization should not automatically be equated with formal legitimacy. A practice can become institutionally embedded without possessing equivalent formal authorization.

Phantom Policies and Disciplinary Power

The findings also demonstrate the relevance of Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. Direct managerial control is not always necessary to influence teacher behavior. Once employees believe that an organizational expectation is legitimate, they may monitor and regulate their own conduct. Teachers may complete activities, maintain records, follow procedures, or modify professional behavior since they anticipate administrative observation or evaluation.

This represents an important shift from external control to self-regulation. The phantom policy operates particularly effectively when employees are uncertain about the precise boundaries of acceptable behavior. Rather than waiting for direct instructions, teachers may attempt to anticipate what administrators expect from them.

The result is a form of organizational self-discipline.

The principal does not need to continuously issue commands. The perceived existence of the expectation can encourage teachers to regulate their behavior. This finding supports the proposition developed in Chapter 3 that phantom policies can exercise disciplinary power when teachers internalize perceived organizational expectations and regulate their own conduct in anticipation of observation, evaluation, or social judgment.

At the same time, the findings indicate that disciplinary power should not only be interpreted as coercive. Teachers may genuinely believe that compliance represents appropriate professional conduct. Power can therefore operate through normalization, professional identity, and self-regulation rather than via explicit punishment.

Phantom Policies Through Lukes' Three Dimensions of Power

Luke's' framework provides another useful interpretation of the findings.

The first dimension of power concerns the overt decision-making power. This includes situations in which principals explicitly direct teachers to perform particular activities. Phantom policies can operate at this level of interaction when a principal openly invokes an existing expectation.

The second dimension of power concerns controlling the agendas and preventing certain issues from becoming subjects of discussion. Phantom policies may operate here when their ambiguous status prevents teachers from openly questioning them or when employees assume that the legitimacy of the expectation is not a matter for discussion.

The third dimension of power is particularly important for the present study. It concerns shaping people so that individuals come to see a particular arrangement as natural or necessary.

Phantom policies closely correspond to this third dimension. A teacher who believes that an unsupported requirement is simply part of the job may not perceive compliance as the result of managerial power. The teacher may instead consider the behavior to be normal, necessary, or professionally appropriate.

Power therefore operates through the construction of what the employee considers legitimate and unavoidable. This helps to explain why phantom policies can be more powerful than their formal status would suggest. Their effectiveness does not depend entirely on the strength of the underlying rule. It depends upon the strength of the belief surrounding the rule..

Weberian Authority and the Legitimacy-Authority Gap

Weberian theory provides a particularly important explanation for how phantom policies acquire perceived authority. Principals possess formal organizational positions that normally provide them with legitimate authority. Teachers therefore have institutional reasons to interpret communications from principals as authoritative. The findings suggest that this institutional legitimacy can extend beyond formally authorized policies.

An expectation communicated by, attributed to, or associated with a legitimate principal may acquire credibility even when its formal basis is unclear. The authority of the organizational position can therefore indirectly strengthen the perceived authority of the expectation.

This creates what the study conceptualizes as the **legitimacy-authority gap**.

The principal may possess legitimate formal authority, while the particular expectation communicated under that authority may lack equally clear formal authorisation. The distinction is subtle but analytically significant. The findings therefore suggest that organizational actors may transfer legitimacy from the **source of authority** to the **content of an expectation**. Once this occurs, questioning the expectation can appear equivalent to questioning the legitimate authority of the principal.

This mechanism helps explain why teachers may comply with unsupported requirements even when they are uncertain about their formal basis.

Sensemaking and the Construction of Phantom Policies

Sensemaking Theory presents a plausible account of how phantom policies develop. In schools, teachers often work in ambiguous, non-prescriptive, inconsistent, or incompletely communicated contexts. In these contexts, they have to interpret and determine their own courses of professional conduct. This means that teachers do not just passively adopt a prescription; rather they actively engage their organizational environment, using a range of sources to determine what they ought to do.

When a formal prescription is unclear or non-existent, teachers may consult with colleagues, rely on prior experience, observe and learn from the conduct of others, recall past similar situations and their resolutions, observe the conduct of the prime-agent (principal) and senior administrators, and formulates her own expectations of professionally acceptable conduct. These processes

help build up a consensus which may come to dominate the organization and dictate the conduct of its members.

For instance, if a teacher is unsure if she is obliged to complete a certain report, attend to a meeting, follow a procedure, or perform any other administrative task, she is likely to discuss the matter with a colleague. If that colleague tells her that “normally” she is required to do so, she may well accept this as the correct course of action. Other teachers may have come to the same conclusion independently, or upon consulting different colleagues. If this becomes a widespread practice, then it can come to dominate the organization, even when it is not formally prescribed.

This, therefore, is a way in which a phantom policy can develop. A phantom policy arises when a certain interpretation of an ambiguous context develops sufficient believability and acceptance to influence organizational conduct. Note that believability does not derive from a formal or regulatory source. It is sufficient for the interpretation to be reasonably plausible in order for it to become influential. It is also important to note that employees rarely have the luxury of time to engage the whole process of seeking clarification and building consensus before they proceed to implement the interpretation they have developed. In most cases, they have to rely on the most apparently reasonable interpretation and act on it in order to keep the business of the organization running. Where multiple employees develop the same interpretation, it can exert considerable influence.

Furthermore, if a number of employees adopt a particular interpretation, their behavior in accordance with it may, in turn, serve as evidence for its validity. For instance, if a number of teachers believe that an activity is prescribed by the principal, their uniform action in performing the activity provides evidence for the belief. Their behavior may then lead new teachers to adopt the same interpretation.

Therefore, it is not unreasonable for a teacher to believe that an activity is prescribed by the principal. The belief may have arisen out of discussion with teachers believed to be credible sources of information on the principal’s expectations. It may have been reinforced by observing other teachers perform the activity and assuming that they must believe it to be formally prescribed. The teacher may also observe that other teachers continue to carry out the activity and fail to respond to queries about it with any information which would contradict her interpretation. Finally, she may go on to perform the activity herself, believing it to be a formal requirement.

In summary, it can be seen that sensemaking plays a key role in shaping the initial conditions for the emergence of a phantom policy. It is important to note, however, that the development of the policy is not necessarily deliberate or dishonest. Sensemaking, and the consequent actions it motivates, are part of the process by which employees deal with ambiguity. However, once such policies emerge, they can have significant effects on the behavior of employees.

From Ambiguity to Informal Power

This integrated theoretical analysis highlights that ambiguity on its own is not sufficient for a phantom policy to emerge. There is a number of organizational processes which can interact in a sequence. The first step is ambiguity. This then influences sensemaking, as employees attempt to interpret the situation and reach an acceptable resolution.

Once an interpretation has been chosen, it can be attributed to an authority. The choice of interpretation may be linked to the assumption that it reflects the expectations of the principal, senior administrators, government agencies, or another appropriate authority. The next process to occur is perceived legitimacy. The interpretation can acquire legitimacy in the minds of the employees as a reasonable course of action. This may be enhanced by social confirmation, as employees come to share a common perception and act in accordance with it.

The process of repetition can reinforce the interpretation as legitimate, acceptable and normal. This may eventually lead to institutionalization. Once institutionalized, the process of internalization can begin. Employees come to accept that they are obliged to behave in a particular way, without any expectation of direct supervision or instructions. They can regulate their own behavior and that of others in accordance with the phantom policy.

Finally, the development of internal beliefs about a phantom policy can confer informal power on the policy. Employees’ behavior can be influenced by an expectation which has acquired credibility and social legitimacy. It is worth noting that this expectation rarely takes the form of an explicit formal policy. Rather, informal authority, organizational beliefs, social expectations, and legitimacy can combine to influence behavior.

At a later stage, the principal may interact with existing organizational beliefs. The principal may endorse, question, formalize, amend, or revoke an established belief. The principal may also choose to use the belief as a tool for influencing the behavior of employees. This is especially the case where the teacher is already in possession of the belief in her capacity as an employee. By reinforcing the belief, the principal is able to gain greater control and influence over the teachers’ behavior without having to explicitly formulate a new policy.

The combined processes by which ambiguity leads to phantom expectations can therefore be summarized as: Organisational ambiguity → Sensemaking → Authority attribution → Perceived legitimacy → Social confirmation → Repetition → Institutionalization → Internalization → Informal power → Managerial leverage

The study makes an important theoretical contribution by highlighting that phantom policies are not merely deceptive or imagined policies. They represent a set of organizational processes by which ambiguity leads to widely shared beliefs. These beliefs, when acquired by sufficient employees, can become institutionalized and exert considerable leverage over the behavior of employees.

This study also identifies the process by which phantom policies can develop. By its very nature, the development of a phantom policy rarely involves deliberate attempts to create an explicit policy. By the time a phantom policy becomes firmly planted in the minds of employees, even those who support it may have forgotten its origins. This is why the process must be understood as something which can happen naturally. A phantom policy is less likely to be perceived as an explicitly formulated policy; rather, it represents a set of beliefs which may have arisen out of uncertainty.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter concludes the study by synthesizing the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical arguments presented throughout the preceding chapters. The study examined how principals discover, maintain, and strategically leverage phantom policies to shape teacher behavior. The analysis demonstrated that phantom policies are a distinct type of informal organizational governance in which employees perceive an organizational expectation as mandatory or officially authorized despite its institutional basis being unclear, absent, or difficult to verify.

The central argument of the study is that organizational influence does not rely exclusively upon formally documented policies. In environments characterized by ambiguity, informal communication, organizational memory, social conformity, and strong perceptions of managerial authority, an unsupported expectation can gain practical legitimacy and influence teacher behavior through compliance, anticipation, self-regulation, and professional conformity.

The study therefore conceptualizes phantom policies not simply as misunderstandings or incorrect interpretations but as organizational phenomena capable of developing, persisting, and producing meaningful managerial consequences.

Conclusion of the Study

The study began by observing that schools frequently operate through a combination of formal policies and informal expectations. Formal policies provide institutional authority while informal practices often emerge through custom, experience, professional culture, and communication. Between these two categories exists a less clearly recognized phenomenon: the phantom policy. A phantom policy emerges when an expectation lacks clear or verifiable authorization but is perceived by employees as mandatory or legitimate. The distinctiveness feature is the gap between perceived obligation and actual or demonstrable authorization.

The study demonstrates that this gap can have significant organizational consequences.

Phantom policies may emerge from ambiguous administrative communication, historical practices, informal transmission, organizational assumptions, or changes in arrangements. Their emergence does not necessarily require deliberate manipulation by a principal. An expectation may develop unintentionally and gradually acquire organizational significance.

Once an expectation exists, principals may discover it by observing teacher behavior, seeing organizational communication, noticing recurring administrative practices, or experiencing organizational change. At this stage, the principal may realize that teachers already perceive the expectation as authoritative.

Maintenance then occurs through repetition, social reproduction, organizational socialization, administrative reinforcement, anticipated consequences, silence, and normalization. The more frequently the expectation is reproduced, the more familiar it may appear to employees.

Eventually, institutionalization can occur. Employees may cease questioning the origin of the expectation and treat it as a normal feature of organizational life. The organization may know what employees are expected to do without knowing why the expectation exists or who formally authorized it. This condition constitutes the study's concept of the authorization-memory gap.

At this point, a phantom policy can be available for strategic managerial leverage. A principal can reinforce an existing expectation because teachers already perceive it as legitimate. The principal does not necessarily need to create a formal rule. Instead, the principal can activate an existing belief to influence behavior.

This represents the transition from organizational belief to managerial resource. The study further demonstrates that teacher responses are not uniform. Teachers may comply because they believe the expectation is legitimate, comply because they fear possible consequences, conform because colleagues comply, adapt behavior while questioning the expectation, seek clarification, verify the expectation's formal basis, negotiate its meaning, or resist it.

Consequently, phantom policies should not be understood as automatically effective. Their effectiveness depends upon the continuing reproduction of perceived legitimacy.

Answer to the Main Research Question

The main research question asked:

How do principals discover, maintain, and strategically leverage phantom policies to shape teacher behavior without relying on formal authority?

The study concludes that principals can discover phantom policies by observing recurring teacher practices, listening to organizational communication, identifying assumptions embedded in institutional routines, and experiencing expectations during periods of organizational change. Discovery occurs through both direct observation and participation in organizational sensemaking.

Principals maintain phantom policies by reinforcing expectations through communication, administrative behavior, repetition, social confirmation, and organizational routines. Maintenance can be intentional or unintentional. A principal may actively reinforce an expectation or simply continue a practice that has already become embedded. Strategic leverage occurs when principals realize that an existing organizational belief can influence teacher behavior. By invoking or reinforcing a perceived requirement, the principal can potentially generate compliance without creating an equivalent formal policy.

The study concludes that principals can shape teacher behavior through phantom policies because perceived authority can produce practical consequences even when formal authorization is absent or uncertain. Managerial mechanism is not necessarily direct coercion. It can operate through legitimacy, anticipation, normalization, peer confirmation, professional identity, and self-regulation.

Answer to the Substantive Research Questions

The study's examination of the emergence of phantom policies indicates that they are associated with organizational ambiguity, informal transmission, historical practices, and assumptions concerning administrative expectations. Origins can be accidental and socially constructed.

The discovery of phantom policies occurs when principals become aware of expectations that employees already treat as organizational requirements. Such discovery may result from observing teacher behavior, hearing repeated references to a requirement, or experiencing organizational change and inconsistencies.

Their maintenance depends upon reproduction. Communication, repetition, peer confirmation, administrative reinforcement, organizational socialization, and historical continuity transform an uncertain expectation into a normalized practice.

Teacher compliance is influenced by perceived legitimacy, anticipated consequences, peer behavior, professional identity, uncertainty, and the perceived authority of the principal. Importantly, observable compliance does not necessarily mean that teachers genuinely believe in the legitimacy of the expectation.

Strategic leverage becomes possible when a phantom policy already possesses sufficient organizational credibility. Principals can reinforce such expectations selectively or use them to guide behavior without relying upon formal rule-making.

The study also establishes that phantom policies may be challenged when teachers gain access to authoritative information, discover contradictions between the expectation and policy, experience excessive costs, perceive unfair enforcement, or develop collective confidence in questioning the expectation.

Finally, phantom policies can have both positive and negative organizational consequences. They may facilitate coordination and compliance but can also reduce professional autonomy, create uncertainty, generate unequal treatment, undermine transparency, and distrust.

Theoretical Contributions

The first theoretical contribution of the study is the conceptualization of phantom policy as a distinct organizational phenomenon. The concept provides an analytical category for expectations that are neither formal policies nor ordinary informal norms.

The second contribution is the identification of the authorization-memory gap. Organizations may retain collective memory of an expectation while losing reliable evidence of its authorization. This explains how unsupported practices can survive changes in leadership.

The third contribution concerns the relationship between ambiguity and power. The study demonstrates that ambiguity is not only an administrative weakness but can be a resource through which actors exercise influence.

The fourth contribution concerns institutionalization. The study demonstrates that institutionalization does not require formal authorization. An expectation can become taken for granted through repetition and social acceptance even when its institutional basis is uncertain. The fifth contribution concerns managerial power. Phantom policies demonstrate how organizational leaders can potentially influence behavior by leveraging existing perceptions of legitimacy. The sixth contribution concerns the relationship between theories integrated in the study. Sensemaking explains how ambiguity acquires meaning; Weberian theory explains authority attribution; Institutional Theory explains how repeated practices become normalized; Foucault explains employees internalizing expectations and regulating themselves; Lukes explains how power can operate through shaping perceptions and preferences. The concept of phantom policy connects these mechanisms into a single process.

Practical Implications for Principals

Principals should recognize the distinction between formal authority and perceived authority. An expectation may be widely

accepted by teachers but lack a clear institutional foundation. Administrators should verify the formal basis of important requirements before presenting them as mandatory. Where uncertainty exists, principals should communicate clearly whether an expectation represents a policy, preference, instruction, or informal practice. Principals should be aware that short-term compliance obtained through ambiguity may produce long-term organizational costs. If teachers later discover that an apparently mandatory requirement was never authorized, confidence in communication may decline.

The responsible use of managerial authority therefore requires transparency concerning the status of organizational expectations.

Recommendations for Schools

Schools should establish clearer mechanisms for distinguishing formal policies from informal expectations. Teachers should be able to easily access official regulations, procedures, and decisions relevant to their responsibilities. Schools should also maintain accessible records of important administrative decisions to prevent the development of authorization-memory gaps.

Regular clarification of organizational procedures can prevent informal assumptions from becoming perceived mandatory requirements. An organizational culture that permits respectful questioning should be encouraged. Teachers should be able to ask where a requirement originates without automatically being perceived as resistant.

Recommendations for Teachers

Teachers should be able to distinguish between what they believe is required and what can be verified through institutional sources. When an expectation appears unclear or unusually burdensome, seeking clarification can prevent informal assumptions from becoming organizational requirements.

Teachers should recognize that colleagues may unintentionally reproduce inaccurate information. Peer confirmation does not necessarily establish formal legitimacy. At the same time, questioning organizational expectations should be constructive. The objective should be clarification and transparency rather than confrontation.

Recommendations for Educational Authorities

Educational authorities should prioritize clarity and accessibility in policy communication. Regulations that are difficult to interpret or inaccessible create conditions where informal interpretations can substitute for guidance. Authorities should periodically review administrative procedures to identify outdated, contradictory, or ambiguously communicated requirements.

Clear documentation of policy changes is particularly important. When temporary instructions become embedded in organizational routines without clear documentation of their status, they may become phantom policies. Strengthening institutional transparency can reduce the space in which unsupported expectations acquire authority.

Future Research

Future research should examine phantom policies across different educational systems and environments. Comparative research could determine if the phenomenon operates differently in public, private, universities, vocational institutions, and bureaucracies.

Longitudinal research would be valuable as phantom policies are fundamentally processual phenomena. Following an organizational expectation from emergence to institutionalization, strategic leverage, resistance, and possible collapse would provide stronger evidence regarding the proposed life-cycle model. Future studies could examine the perspectives of principals and teachers separately. Principals may understand a practice as an informal preference while teachers may interpret the same practice as a mandatory requirement.

Quantitative research could eventually examine the prevalence of phantom policies and relationship with variables such as organizational trust, employee autonomy, job satisfaction, perceived legitimacy, and compliance. Comparative research could investigate if phantom policies are more prevalent in organizations characterized by hierarchical authority, weak documentation, limited policy accessibility, or strong informal cultures.

Finally, future research should examine if phantom policies exist beyond educational organizations. Hospitals, government agencies, corporations, universities, military, and nonprofit institutions may contain gaps between perceived obligation and authorization.

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