

An Elementary School Hallway: A Ritual Highway

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Over a four month span of time, I observed children in the upper elementary hallway of Pellegrini (pseudonym) Elementary School, located in a small city in northern Georgia. Midway through the observational period, which also involved videotaping children's behavior in the hallway, I began interviewing a sample of third, fourth, and fifth graders from the school about activities that take place in the hallway. Pellegrini Elementary is a school that is overcrowded, with about seven hundred students in a relatively new facility built for about six hundred children. The school, like the local community, has a predominantly Euro-American population and the major ethnic minority is African American, making up about twenty percent of both the community and school's population.

I decided to concentrate on the external, physical kinds of groups children formed in the hallway. Three major varieties were discovered. First, children form lines, which were almost always initiated and heavily controlled by teachers. The primary purpose of these lines is to move children from one place to another and to maintain order with a minimum of social interaction between children. A second kind of group I named the phalanx, where two or more children walk side by side down the hallway, engaging in verbal or nonverbal communication in the process. The third kind of group is the cluster which is a gathering of children in a circular or semicircular arrangement, and also involves verbal or nonverbal communication. Social activities can be understood within the theoretical framework of school and peer cultures, the former marked by formality, routine, submission to adults, and adult values, and the latter marked by play, multiple options, peer norms and values, and flexibility (Baker, 1985; Bauman, 1982; Fine, 1981; Sutton-Smith, 1982, p. 201, 1990). The line is predominantly an expression of school culture, while the phalanx and cluster reflect peer culture to a greater extent. Extended qualitative and quantitative analysis of both observational and interview data that relate to each of these three kinds of groups is considered in detail elsewhere (Ratcliff, 1995).

In the process of doing research, two metaphors emerged that helped describe the physical aspects of social interaction in the school hallway. Metaphors produce creative, powerful linkages among ideas and are a means of "making the commonplace strange" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, pp. 274-276). While using metaphors in qualitative analysis runs the risks of reification and the problem of manipulating data to make the metaphor fit, metaphors can also increase interest and convey a great deal of meaning to a subject (Patton, 1990, pp. 400-402).

Rituals

The first metaphor is ritual, which involves routinized actions or ceremonies (Erikson, 1977, pp. 78-83). Human interaction rituals are often performed in a perfunctory manner, with little thought or reflection as to their meaning, as is the case in common greeting rituals (Goffman, 1971). School hallway rituals are not the grand rituals that Erikson associates with major changes or events in life, instead they are everyday regularities that are often taken for granted.

Van Gennep (1960, pp. 15-24) describes the formalities required for crossing the border from one geographical region to another, such as customs clearance when going to another country. Throughout history, this kind of territorial boundary is clearly marked, and often there is a neutral zone between countries which is considered by van Gennep to be a place of "wavering between two worlds." Once the rites of passage were performed, the individual could pass through the neutral zone to another territory or region.

At Pellegrini Elementary School, the place of "wavering between two worlds" is the hallway. The classroom is predominantly marked by school culture, while the playground and cafeteria are predominantly peer culture. The hallway is a more or less neutral zone between these two cultures. At times expressions of school culture predominate in the hallway, as when lines snake their way to and from classrooms and other areas of the school building. At other times expressions of peer culture predominate, denoted by the presence of phalanxes and clusters. Occasionally there is a mixture of both school and peer cultures; all three kinds of groups can exist simultaneously. Wavering between the two worlds of peer culture and school culture is a particularly apt term for the hallway context.

What specific hallway rituals were observed? The involvement of children in one of the three kinds of groups might be considered ritualistic, as there are rules or patterns of behavior implicit in each kind of group. In addition, there are a number of other routinized, perfunctory activities that might also be considered rituals. Countless times I observed children rubbing the walls of the hall as they passed down the corridor. Doorways to classrooms and other areas of the school are often struck as children passed through. A favorite game of a few boys was jumping and hitting the top of the doorway, something I observed in other schools and even at home with my children. At Pellegrini Elementary, each classroom entryway has a large round pole that apparently helps support the roof of the building. These poles are touched, rubbed, banged, climbed, and played with countless times each day by children as they pass by or as they wait to enter the classroom.

Passage between territories, as described by van Gennep, is restricted and requires permission. Likewise, at Pellegrini Elementary the main entryways to the school are near the principal's and assistant principal's offices. Large windows allow administrators to monitor who enters and leaves the buildings. Similarly, Johnson (1982) describes "guardians of the complex" who carefully monitor and control access to

school buildings. In addition, the entryway from the central section of the school to the upper elementary hallway has a sign, ostensibly for parents, stating the earliest time a child can be picked up after school. The entryway to each classroom is marked by a sign, noting the teacher and grade level, thus denoting the authority of the teacher over that school space and the students permitted access to the room.

Although Pellegrini elementary does not require a written hallway pass, as is customary in some other schools, administrators and teachers readily identified children and adults who did not belong in the hall. When a child was discovered in the hallway at an inappropriate time, I observed ritual degradation ceremonies, such as being escorted to a time out room or being subjected to a public scolding.

Teachers often require children to line up prior to leaving the classroom, and sometimes before they could enter the room. Children are required to be virtually silent and motionless in the line before they are allowed to move across the classroom boundary. The silence both before and during movement was eerie, and I alternated between thinking of it as being similar to religious liturgy and at other times comparing it an old movie, with a title like "The Night of the Living Dead."

Other researchers have also described ritualistic aspects of schools. Jackson (1990, pp. 6-8) compares the rituals of church to school rituals such as children raising hands to speak in class and rituals related to strict scheduling of activities. Similarly Erickson (1982) compares aspects of school lessons to a Roman Catholic mass, and Merritt (1982, pp. 227-228) describes the ritual closure of class discussions and deference to a powerful Other--teachers and administrators--within the school context. The school day is punctuated by "ritual oaths and songs" such as the pledge of allegiance and singing "America," notes Gracey (1993). Youngsters perform rituals of resistance to counteract the teaching rituals of teachers, comments McLaren (1993, pp. 145-179). The existence of ritual in schools suggests the possibility of using a broader metaphorical system to describe this context. To what extent is the school like a religious system? McLaren (1993, p. 153) describes the teacher's role as that of a priest, while Herrera (1988, p. 16) denotes activities in the school he studied as "pastoral care" in contrast with active education. Johnson (1982) considers signs outside the school building, large spaces around schools, and other architectural components of the school landscape as setting it apart from surrounding territories. This sacred space, crowned by a flagpole rather than a cathedral spire, is dotted by icons of accomplishment, the drawings and test papers hung in the hallway. Has the school become a secular church, encouraging belief in, affirmation of, and devotion to society's values?

The Hallway as a Highway

A second metaphor occurred to me early in my observations, and was readily confirmed and elaborated by teachers and students subsequent to the study. The hallway is a highway where children generally walk or run to their destinations.

I noticed that children usually walk on the right side of the hall, following the custom of automobile traffic in the United States. Doorways to classrooms and other areas of the school are intersections where children join or exit from general hallway traffic. Drinking fountains, restrooms, and areas surrounding entryways to classrooms serve as rest stops.

Teachers are like police troopers, pulling over suspicious "cars" for a thorough check. "Get up against the wall," a teacher told her line of children on one occasion, much like an officer getting ready to do a body search. Teachers described themselves as traffic cops, directing the traffic of children coming and going from classrooms.

Teachers were not the only specialized vehicles on the hallway highway. Children sometimes rush through the hallways with messages or objects to be delivered to teachers and administrators, like postal delivery trucks. On one occasion the assistant principal became an animal shelter truck, escorting a wayward dog from the hallway. I saw several ambulances pass through; children rushing to the restroom with nosebleeds.

The metaphor of the hallway as highway fit in other ways as well. The cafeteria was like a fast food restaurant; children often complain about the quality of food there, much as parents complain about the quality of fast food restaurants. Crowds are like traffic jams, and rush hour occurred at predictable times of the day as several classrooms emptied into the hallway at the same time. Teachers talk about collisions occurring on the highway, the need to learn the rules of the road, and the freedom to drive being suspended for speeding (in other words, running instead of walking). Children added that the oldest children in the school are like semi trucks, large and insisting on the right of way. Youngsters also commented that hallways are long and narrow like highways, and people often stop in the middle of the road to chat, as is the custom in rural Georgia.

I developed the term *cruising* to describe a distinctive variety of hallway behavior that fits within the highway metaphor. Children sometimes wander slowly in the hallway, searching for something to observe. Sometimes artwork on the walls captures their attention or perhaps an activity observed through the window of a door gains their interest. Children look at or contribute to graffiti on doorway posts or other places in the hallway as they cruise.

Cruising can also be a social activity involving several youngsters. Children sometimes exchange brief greetings or other verbal exchanges as they move through the school hall. Sometimes they touch one another as a part of the cruise. Here the two metaphors, ritual and highway, overlap; a passing touch or greeting is usually a casual exchange that can be considered peripheral to the movement through the hallway using the highway metaphor. Touches and greetings are central issues of concern with the ritual metaphor. Touches and verbal exchanges are sometimes positive, affirming activities, at other times they are hostile or teasing in nature, and on still other occasions they lack any overt intention. These activities that accompany cruising may indicate positive social interaction, assertions of dominance, and many other possibilities. Unfortunately I did not ask the children in the interview groups what these activities meant to them, an issue worthy of future

investigation.

Conclusion

The upper elementary hallway of Pellegrini elementary is a ritual highway. Both metaphors highlight the routinized, structured ways that children interact in the school hallway. The manifest function of the hallway, space intended to permit the passage of students from one location to another, is underscored by the highway metaphor. The ritual metaphor, in contrast, suggests that the routinized aspects in hallway activities may in fact be a latent affirmation of either peer or school cultures. Both metaphors emphasize the issue of adult control in the hallway context: teachers direct and inspect the traffic, and components of the school culture are affirmed in many of the rituals. In addition, both metaphors also indicate a degree of student autonomy in the hallway, as youngsters decide how fast and sometimes where they travel on the highway, and performance of greeting, teasing, and dominance rituals are peer initiated. The school hallway is an interesting social context in which both school and peer cultures of children can be explored.

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