

## STUDENTS AND THE ORGANISATION OF THE SCHOOL

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper reports the findings of an ethnographic study of a group of year 11 boys in a single-sex school who are deemed by teachers and fellow students as "unacceptable pupils".*

*A substantial body of literature deals with disaffected students. Their collective interaction is often described as a counter-school subculture or as an informal organisation within the school. The research reported here indicates that such pupils are able not only to assert their own individuality and circumvent the institutional axis in which they operate, but are also able to influence what is perceived to be the formal structure of the school.*

### Introduction

Most of the literature on school organisation and educational administration falls broadly within a functionalist paradigm (see Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Until recently, mainstream scholars have dismissed alternative approaches as merely ideological exercises (Willower, 1979). However, current references by established scholars to "intellectual turmoil" (Griffiths, 1979), "broken ikons" (Halpin and Hayes, 1977) and "an overdue paradigm shift" (Erickson, 1977) indicate that alternative explanatory frameworks are required to interpret and analyse schools as organisations.

Writers such as Bates (1982, 1983) and Greenfield (1973, 1980, 1983) have argued for some time that dominant approaches to educational administration and school organisation have uncritically transferred from the study of business management and the behavioural sciences a preoccupation with control, efficiency and regulation (see also Callahan, 1962). A typical example of such an approach is to be found in a recent text by Hoy and Miskel (1982), the wide and uncritical use of which reflects the deep entrenchment of systems management in the thinking of educational administrators. It does more, however. A preoccupation with organisation theory also removes from consideration the unique and fundamental educational purposes of schools (Bates, 1982). Educational concerns are reduced to matters of school organisation which are the preserve of school managers. Within this "technology of control" (Bates 1983) teachers, much less the scarcely-mentioned pupils, are regarded as objects upon which school managers can practice leadership, evaluation, co-ordination and delegation. Those being led, evaluated, co-ordinated and delegated to, and those being taught, motivated and controlled, seem hardly to feature in the organisation of the school. As Greenfield argues:

The striking feature of modern organisation theory and its dominating systems metaphor is that individuals virtually disappear from view as whole concrete entities. (1983: 17)

This means that, as far as the organisation theorists of education are concerned:

Human agency virtually disappears from organisations . . . [But] in denying the creative role of the individual in organisation, modern theory is blind also to the very dynamic that makes the organisation . . . [because] individuals do not just make the organisation, they are the organisation. (Greenfield, 1983: 26)

In contrast to the systems theory and behavioural science views, scholars such as Greenfield and Bates argue that schools, like other organisations, are people - individuals acting upon and being acted upon by other individuals in a complex network of relationships that passes for school organisation or school structure. In short:

Organisations are a moral order in action - an order created and maintained by individuals. The dynamic of organisation is power that enables some people to bind others by imposing values on them.

(Greenfield, 1983)

Recognising this, several writers have recently argued for the democratisation of social relations within schools in order to recognise and ensure that a part is played by all school participants in creating the organisation of the school (Watkins, 1983; Foster, 1983; and Bates 1983). Even in these discussions, however, the contribution of pupils to school organisation, or in Greenfield's words, its 'moral order', is largely overlooked.

This paper, by using data collected during an extensive ethnographic study in a Catholic boys' secondary school, focusses directly upon the impact of students, particularly a group of disaffected students, upon the day to day operation of the school. The discussion advances a case for more democratic classroom relationships, and for the recognition and encouragement of the active role that pupils can play in the construction of such relationships.

### Power, Pupils and Individuality

We often assume that power in schools is hierarchically structured. Such assumptions were made at Catholic Boys' College where it was common to hear talk of "a good strong boss", "running a tight ship" and of teachers who have "got good control". But such common-sense understandings can lead to administrators, teachers and pupils performing their school duties on the basis of a false conception of the nature of power. Such language reinforces a distorted view of power as something that can be possessed by individuals (Knights and Roberts, 1982) whereas, as Greenfield reminds us:

Power lies in relationships among people. Organisations are expressions of these relationships and are therefore instruments of power. The organisation is a tool that enables (more or less) some people to do what they want and that requires others to participate in the realization of others' desires, wants, beliefs and purposes. In this sense, organisations are tools for action. They do what some people want to see done and they do it by enlisting or compelling the participation of individuals so that their efforts and talents produce what other people want. (1983: 40)

Hence, what we see in schools as order - an essential aspect of the abstract system of the school in which units fit neatly into its collective organisation - shrouds the possibility of illegitimate power "by assuming consensus where there may only be compliance" that is gained by coercion (Knights and Roberts, 1982: 47). The establishment of school and classroom order, however, is typically thought to be the business of teachers, who successfully impose their definitions of school reality upon pupils to the extent that they are able to "control" them. Such a conception rules out a view of classroom consensus as the product of a collaborative relationship. We assume that "it is only when the teachers fail to make their desired order clear that the pupils actively explore/negotiate/challenge their teachers" (Davies, 1983: 55). The established picture of schools is sketched against a background of teacher control and constituting activity, and the irrelevance and invisibility of pupils. A recent study by Goodlad supports the dominant construction:

Overwhelmingly, (teachers) and not their students take the initiative. Teachers are in charge; they set the dominant tone. Students are passive. They listen and watch; they do written assignments and quizzes - lots of quizzes. There is little praise, little correction with feedback, little laughter, little anger, little overt emotionality of any kind. The tone of most classrooms in our sample is best described as flat. (Goodlad, 1983: 795-796)

The flatness and dullness of classroom life soon disappears, however, when "the underlying co-operativeness (of pupils) which is usually taken for granted and therefore not noticed by the participants" (Davies, 1983: 56) is withdrawn. For, as Knights and Roberts make clear:

By virtue of being self-conscious creatures, individuals always retain some degree of autonomy over their action, and coercion can therefore never become an automatic process through which one person gains complete control over another. At the very least coercion requires the active submission of one person to another but equally attempts at coercion may lead to more or less overt forms of resistance. (1982: 50)

At Catholic Boys' College, a group of year 11 pupils co-operated only selectively with their teachers. As a result, members of the group that was the focus of the study, the "sweathogs"<sup>1</sup> as they called themselves, were each regarded by at least some of their teachers as unacceptable students. Analysis of the perceptions of the sweathogs makes it clear that group members see themselves as being separate identities within the school (Angus, 1982). Their group image embraces much of what a number of authors describe as a counter-school culture (see, for example, Willis, 1977; Palonsky, 1975); it involves a pride in their reputation as unacceptable pupils and an emphasis upon sport, alcohol and sex. They see themselves as being more "social" than other students in that, although they may lack ability at school, they feel superior to more "acceptable" pupils in "life" (Angus, 1981). As the sweathogs define themselves largely in opposition to the formally stated expectations of the school, their uncooperative behaviour is usually regarded as being in conflict with the school's formal structure. Riffel (1977), however, argues that the impact of such pupils is actually an intrinsic part of the school as an organisation. This, he claims, adds to the "paradoxical nature of educational organisation" (Riffel, 1977: 1) which "tell us much of what is unique about schools" (Riffel, 1977: 4). In other words, the sweathogs, like other pupils, teachers, administrators, parents and community members, contribute to the "moral order" (Greenfield, 1983) that is the school.

In the analysis of data which follows, attention is focussed upon the sweathogs and their involvement in school organisation. These students are seen to be able to create their own space in which to manoeuvre even within the seemingly restrictive structure of the school. Within classrooms, too, pupils are seen to influence lessons - whether teachers invite their influence or not.

#### Winning Space

The sweathogs had a reputation for being able to confront the school's official organisation on their own terms, unlike more acceptable students, such as the hard-working Richard:

Richard: It's funny, guys like Terry and Baz ... they sort of know their way around the school and they're more the sort of characters of the school whereas the maths/science guys are here to do work - it's just a place of work.

Bazza, in particular, was one of the school's "characters". His exploits demonstrate the inadequacy of construing school organisation as the batch processing of inert pupils. Instead, he is a living example of contradiction within organisation (Benson, 1977) - an embodiment of the "inevitable strains and conflicts contained in, though they may be masked by, apparent organisational stability" (Salaman, 1978: 548).

Bazza somehow managed to win for himself his own space within the structure of the school, his actions often resulting in his being able to do what he wanted, rather than what "the school" wanted. Through long experience of battling, and sometimes beating, the official school organisation, Baz had discovered that the simple ploy of not filling in forms and of leaving his name off lists could provide a means of protest and also result in time won from the school.

<sup>1</sup> The group of boys formed a football team called "the sweathogs" and challenged all comers. The name stuck. The group comprised a solid core of a dozen members and a number of fringe members.

On one occasion, Mr. Johnston asked Baz and Ando to umpire junior football matches on Friday afternoons - a period set aside for leisure activities. At that time Ando and Bazza would be expected to go to squash, bowling or some other sport. When asked to help out they drew apart from Mr. Johnston and whispered to each other before making a decision.

Baz: (Finally, and slightly reluctantly) Well, all right.  
 Mr. J: Thanks, but why are you so doubtful?  
 Ando: Well, we'll be losing a free period.  
 Mr. J: What do you mean?  
 Baz: Well, our names were left off the lists for activities, so we've just been going home Friday arvos.

Baz' and Ando's names were not on the list because they rarely handed in forms. In this case they did not hand in the one to indicate their preference for activities. Although they expected the lists to be checked for omissions, they naturally took the off-chance that they might get away with it. In this case it worked - no-one checked. But surprisingly, both boys were prepared to give up their "free" time thus won to assist the running of football games for the junior boys. They could easily have continued as they were simply by declining to umpire the games.

There may have been a number of reasons for the boys' decision to help. Perhaps they were influenced by their own enjoyment of football; perhaps, since they had already gained a victory against the formal organisation, they were prepared to negotiate in an informal way for time which they now could voluntarily give; or perhaps they were simply prepared to "do the right thing" for a teacher whom they respected and "got along with". Perhaps, too, confiding in a teacher whom they knew would not "dob them in" added to the adventure, in that they received a teacher's recognition of their daring. All of these factors probably influenced them - in addition, umpiring football afforded further opportunities, which they did not fail to exploit, for gaining free time.

A few days after the discussion with Mr. Johnston, Baz and Ando were walking across the school yard with Richard, a co-operative and conscientious student, when they were approached by a teacher.

Mr. T: (jocularly) What are you lot doing, wagging it?  
 Boys: (laughter and comments) Yeah ... course - wha'd'y' reckon?  
 Baz: Nah, we're lookin' for Mr. Hannan (co-ordinator of junior school).  
 Mr. T: He's probably in the staffroom now.  
 Richard: Thanks. (about to go to staffroom door).  
 Baz: (aghast) Don't be stupid! We'll go to his office first and have a look there. If we find he's not there then we'll come back here.

Since three umpires were required, Baz and Ando had asked Richard to assist them. The three had been released from their accounting class by Mr. Kelly when Baz explained that they had to see Mr. Hannan to arrange details for the football matches. Such a visit was not at all necessary, but seemed to them a more enjoyable way of passing the time than doing accounting, and the excuse was plausible. Including Richard in the group was a tactical ploy - his reputation as an honest and hard working student was sure to add credibility to Bazza's story. Although an excellent student of the formal curriculum, however, Richard does not come close to Bazza's mastery of the means by which the formal organisation of the school can be circumvented. Although he was aware that the whole exercise was a ruse to enable them to gain a degree of temporary freedom within the compulsory ordering of school time, he was a novice at exploiting its full possibilities. The last place Baz wanted to go was where Mr. Hannan would be. The point of looking for him was to gain "free" time, not to actually find him. As it turned out, the boys did eventually find Mr. Hannan in the staffroom where they knew he would be - after they had been to his office, wandered about the junior school, and chatted with the friendly physical education teacher in his office.

Involvement with junior football was, for Bazza, the starting point for a whole series of schemes to avoid the formal situations in which he felt his individuality was too repressed. In the process he showed considerable negotiating and organising skills as he kept these activities within the bounds of semi-legitimacy. He dealt effectively with junior pupils and teachers as his involvement with junior sport became a regular feature of Friday afternoons, and he organised several friends, including Ando and Richard, to help him. The teachers of junior grades felt that he made a helpful contribution. Yet all of this involved for Baz a series of strategies to enable him to act according to his own positive choice. He enjoyed it because he continued to see himself as giving his own time.

Pupils did not always employ such semi-legitimate means of avoiding the demands of the formal school structure, however. Some managed to claim free time by the very direct method of "wagging". In such circumstances mates are expected to cover for the absconder.

Baz: (from outside the door as a class is being dismissed from its final lesson of the day) Hey! Where's Johnno?

Mr. T: Not here. I was told he had to go to the dentist.

Baz: (annoyed that Johnno is not there) No he didn't ...  
(then realising) Oh yeah, maybe he did, too.

Baz knew it was unlikely that Johnno had actually gone to the dentist, and, in his annoyance, almost offended unthinkingly against the code of his group in the most serious possible manner - he came close to "dobbing in a mate". And loyalty and mateship were very important to the sweatogs - indeed it was a major element in their own social relationships.

#### Classroom Control

Not only did students have ways of circumventing the formal organisation, they also influenced its operations. This was particularly the case at the classroom level. An extreme example was for students to choose not to comply with the official expectation that they would attempt to pass exams.

Andrew: Look, some of us who failed (in first semester), we failed the easiest subjects, right. Like I was in Mr. Smith's class first and he was alright - at least he could teach alright. And then I went into Brother Malone's class and I couldn't stop laughing. I never tried to pass.

Andrew claims that he could have passed Br. Malone's subject but that he deliberately refused to comply with the teacher or to attempt to pass as a form of protest. His failure in the subject was a rather pyrrhic victory. In the same class, Baz used less extreme but nevertheless effective methods to get his own way within the system.

Baz: I used to break my neck to get kicked out the room.  
I'd do anything.

The case of the punishment inducing the crime is again a victory for Baz. The official representative of the formal organisation, Br. Malone, is not controlling Baz by applying the official sanction of excluding him from class. For Baz, this is no punishment but rather further corroboration that he, himself, is in informal control. This is despite the fact that Brother Malone, a strict disciplinarian, is considered by his colleagues to "have good control" in that his own definition of the classroom situation is rigidly maintained - partly by the exclusion of "troublemakers" who challenge that definition. Andrew and Bazza, however, illustrate a point made by Giddens (1979: 119) and developed by Knights and Roberts:

... coercive power appears as something one person has over another, and for those coerced it is often seen or described in terms of the denial or removal of individual choice. Nevertheless, this mechanistic view of coercion is ultimately untenable, for, as Giddens notes, however wide the asymmetrical distribution of resources involved, all power relations manifest autonomy and dependence in both directions.

(Knights and Roberts, 1982: 49-50)

Thus, even when a student had been banished from the classroom by a teacher, he could still exercise a large degree of influence on the order of the classroom.

Richard: Everybody wasn't doing what he (Mr West) told them so he started sending guys out. Well, he'd send Bucko (Andrew) out, fair enough, and Bucko'd walk up and down the balcony waving to kids, tapping on the window, doing dances and all that. It was just as bad. He might as well have left him in the room.

Formal sanctions have not worked in this case either. The informal structure has impinged on the formal and has overpowered it.

The relationship between Andrew and Mr. West has deteriorated into a series of moves and counter-moves in which, blind to their essential interdependence, each views the other as a mere object to be controlled (Knights and Roberts, 1982). Class members have an interest in the conflict and may side with one or other combatant depending upon the extent of their acceptance of what Willis (1977) calls "the basic teaching paradigm". Willis postulates that teaching is "essentially a relationship between potential contenders for supremacy" in which teachers in most cases have limited power of direct coercion. In his view, it is the idea of the teacher rather than the actual individual that is legitimated during cumulative years of schooling and, as long as pupils see teaching as a "fair exchange", the teacher has moral superiority because of his presumed knowledge. Willis believes that "this teaching paradigm is legitimated in general because it provides equivalents which can enter into other successive exchanges which are of advantage to the individual". He goes on to point out that "the most important chain of exchanges is that of knowledge for qualifications, a good job with high pay, goods and services" (Willis, 1977: 63-64). Within this framework, school becomes an agency of face-to-face control in which discipline is not so much intended to punish particular wrongs as to maintain the established teaching paradigm, or moral order, in which transactions can take place.

There seem to be two essential ways in which the basic teaching paradigm is supported. One is that the teacher must maintain control through coercion and by treating pupils as objects. The other is that pupils must be taught something that they believe is worthwhile or will lead to a worthwhile result. The latter allows at least some scope for the co-operative involvement of pupils in the construction of classroom organisation to a greater or lesser extent. Such involvement, according to Young, is not widespread in Australian schools at present:

The feelings of pupils tend not to be seen as an educational resource, either in a limited way, as a means of motivation, or in a more complete way, as an input to curriculum decision-making. (Young, 1981 : 11)

#### Teacher Interests and Pupil Interests

It is clear from the preceding section that pupils may influence classroom organisation in a number of ways when they are involved with a teacher who invites their influence by negotiating with them. In such cases the teacher often seeks to reinforce learning by tapping the interest of pupils and so making lessons seem more relevant to them. Denscombe (1980) has pointed out that pupils can use such freedom to negotiate for their own ends.

They could, for instance, manoeuvre the teacher into dealing with topics on the basis of interest rather than any educational value.

(Denscombe, 1980: 67)

This results in pupils often attempting to sidetrack teachers away from "work". The definitions of pupils and teachers of what is useful learning, however, are not always congruent. This point was made in telling fashion by the sweatshops during the course of the research. Because of subject choices, or more correctly lack of choices due to hidden streaming according to Mathematics ability, the group was thrown together for much of the school day. During regularly scheduled English lessons, we sometimes discussed their perceptions of schooling and of themselves. After a particularly open discussion about pupil images, part of which is analysed elsewhere (Angus, 1982), the class felt that they had managed to get out of doing "work":

- Case: (as bell sounded to signal change of lesson)  
Great! We got away with a whole period - and we done no English.
- Teacher: But you did lots of English. Some people expressed great ideas  
and you all did a lot of clear thinking. That was great oral English.
- Jack: (amid laughter and comments as the class moved from the room)  
It was a great bludge!

The general impression amongst the class was one of getting away with distracting the teacher. The lesson was thought to be rather a bludge, yet during the whole of the long discussion, the class was unusually attentive, individuals were eager to participate, and there was more regard than usual for each individual who spoke. There had been no necessity at any stage to call the class to order, almost all in the class had participated in some way, and all seemed interested. There had been a rapid exchange of ideas without any need for teacher intrusion into the discussion.

In short, the discussion brought forth the sort of ingredients which many teachers would look for in a successful lesson. But most pupils in the class apparently felt that, because they did no "work", they got away with something. There was a strong group feeling that they had somehow won and had triumphed over the teacher and the system because they "done no English".

Such responses have interesting implications for the pupils' perceptions of pedagogy and curriculum. They clearly enjoyed the lesson but, because they had initiated the topic rather than the teacher, they felt that the teacher had fallen for the old ploy of being sidetracked away from work that he wanted the class to study. In that case they felt that they had taken control of the proceedings which, now that they were not teacher directed, could no longer be defined as "work" but as a "bludge".

The typified and reified authority relations within which teachers and pupils are expected to know their "place" make teacher interests and pupil interests appear irreconcilable.

#### Anticipating the Teacher

As part of the hidden curriculum pupils learn that the way to maximise their exchange within the teaching paradigm is to always please the teacher.

- Richard: If you do a creative essay you're not as likely to get  
a good mark as if you do a deadpan one ... That's what  
I'm more likely to do at the end of year exam.
- Question: Do you do that in other subjects - predict what the teacher wants?
- Richard: Oh yeah, you have to or you don't get anywhere. You behave like  
teacher wants you to, too - or you try to.

While probably not agreeing with the final part of Richard's comment, about carefully conforming with teacher definitions of behaviour in class, the sweatogs shared his view that it pays to give teachers what they want.

- Question: Do you have to be careful communicating to teachers?
- Jack: Yeah. Like with (Mr. Kelly). You put in your essay what he wants  
and he thinks it's brilliant.
- Andrew: Yeah, we all had to do this wall chart and some of us did it really  
good. And Teddy done this real heap of shit but (Mr. Kelly) thought  
it real good 'cause he had something about 'our greatest asset' and  
(Mr. Kelly) had been harping on that for days.
- Case: We need the marks. You pick what the teacher wants so you get the  
marks. We need the marks to pass.

Again, pupils emphasise gaining marks - almost all of school directed activity being seen in terms of the quest for marks for certification. The knowledge that teachers aim to transfer to the pupils is seen as being less important than the marks they hope to acquire, so pupils may follow lessons closely, not because they are interested in their content, but because they are looking for signs which might reveal the particular interests and prejudices of the teacher which are to be accounted for. In this way pupils, once again, exert their own informal

influence on the formal structure - this time by manipulating the detected biases of teachers to ensure favourable assessment. In other words, Richard, Jack, Andrew and Case, to some extent at least, meet the expectations of their teachers - but their compliance has more to do with coercion than with consensus. They respond to the sanctions of marks and teacher approval rather than to any sense of personal commitment to the norms and practice of the classroom, or to the knowledge that is defined by teachers. Of course the compliance may be withdrawn - but at great cost as in the case of Andrew's deliberately failing in Mr Smith's class.

### Conclusion

Analysis of ethnographic data from a group of pupils who "know their way around" the school has suggested that, despite the silence regarding school students that is found in established texts on educational administration and school organisation, the actions of pupils, collectively and individually, impinge upon what is regarded as the formal structure of the school. Riffel summarises the general understanding of such formal structure:

"The first law of the organisation (is) the maintenance of order. All that is called education emanates from this principle. Any teaching that (takes) place (has) to coexist within this organisational framework."

(Riffel, 1977: 4)

Nevertheless, students in the school were able to assert their own code of behaviour in spite of the organisational structure in which they operated. They sometimes exerted informal control over classrooms to the extent that they disrupted teacher definitions of the classroom situation. Often the informal structure of pupils contributed to a situation of negotiated order resulting in classroom consensus, or at least compliance. In such cases it appeared that negotiation blurred the boundaries between "work" and "having fun". This was sometimes achieved when pupils deliberately diverted class discussion along the lines of their own interests, or the perceived interests of teachers, so avoiding "work". Topics initiated informally by pupils and not the teacher were less likely to be defined as "work".

Many pupils claimed that they could predict the sorts of responses and behaviour that individual teachers preferred. One way of gaining marks, then, was to anticipate what the teacher wanted and then provide it. This had the effect of actually subverting the teacher's intention of conveying information to pupils and motivating them to learn.

Although they were regarded by many teachers as unacceptable pupils, it appears that the sweatshops usually had what they considered to be sound reasons for their actions and opinions. Student misbehaviour, for instance, was neither random nor irrational. It was applied in specific situations and was so calculated as to involve sometimes subtle and stylised resistance to teachers and the "formal" organisation of the school. They sought and obtained a degree of influence upon the process of their schooling. Some teachers afforded them participation and involvement in lessons by negotiating with them to broaden the definition of the classroom situation to include their own. With other teachers, they exerted their personal influences by exercising informal control within classrooms. Outside of class, too, the sweatshops structured their own reality in spite in the institutional structure of the school. Moreover, they did so in ways that demonstrated purposeful behaviour and often a sophisticated mastery of formal and informal social skills.

But the role of pupils in structuring school organisation has remained largely unrecognised and unexamined - at least in recent years. Indeed, Prunty reported in 1981 that, since the initial interest that followed the publication of Coleman's Adolescent Society in 1961, "only one major research of student informality has been conducted in the United States" (Prunty, 1981: 49). This study, Cusick's Inside High School generally confirmed the earlier findings of Waller (1932), Gordon (1957) and Coleman (1961) - that the youth culture of pupils is of primary importance in their lives, and influences their school behaviour and the organisation of classes and of the school.

The findings reported in this paper are in general agreement with those of Coleman (1961) and his predecessors. But I wish to emphasise the point that Bazza and the sweatshops show us that pupils will not be excluded from school organisation. And I want to suggest that the dominant approach to educational administration, by stressing the precedence of organisational patterns over individual involvement in schools, encourages an uncritical acceptance of the dominance of preexisting structures. Such an approach leads to an exaggerated conception of the power of such



structures. Thus, pupils are expected to act out roles that they have not shaped. They must initiate institutional expectations or take the risky course of Bazza and Ando and withdraw their cooperation. But perhaps it is within the power of teachers to be sensitive enough to their pupils to recognise the need for changes in the relationships among school participants such that all may constructively contribute to a more democratic organisation. Such changes would enhance the uniqueness of schools and of classrooms - and of individuals within them - rather than duplicate procedures in an ongoing inheritance of system sameness in which teachers teach much as they were taught. And finally, in focussing upon the process of organising in schools, those who have argued for the democratisation of the social relations within schools would examine ways in which pupil contributions to their moral order might be more explicitly recognized and encouraged.

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