The Search for Consensus

"To a marked degree a majority decision serves to institute an experimental trial which, as it elicits facts not otherwise available, may move the group toward a wider agreement."

IN COMMON with many other activities of modern life the conduct of the school is a group enterprise. As such it requires the cooperative efforts of many individuals based upon the acceptance by all concerned of common decisions and policies. In the past these decisions and policies were typically the work of a hierarchy of administrative officials culminating in the superintendent of schools and the school board. But in recent years—with the active participation of many school administrators—a more democratic theory of educational policy making has gained substantial support. Specific decisions, of course, must often be made by individual administrators and teachers even though these decisions may affect other persons as well. But the formulation of the basic policies which govern such decision making increasingly is being regarded as a group task in which teachers, lay councils and even pupils should participate along with the administrative staff of the school.¹

As yet this conception of educational control is probably limited to a minority of our school systems—and even where it pertains in theory the participation of teachers and lay groups in policy making is sometimes more nominal than real. Nevertheless, there are significant reasons for the belief that the trend toward wider participation in educational policy making will continue. Teachers are now more conscious than they were in the past of the rights and responsibilities of membership in the educational profession. Educational leadership has become more and more aware both of the widespread public concern with the work of the school and the fact that the public will more readily support policies and programs where it has assisted in their formulation. Further, many educators are convinced that it is difficult, if not impossible, to develop democratic character in a school system which does not itself embody democratic principles in its organization and control. And finally, careful studies have shown that a democratic atmosphere is more productive of good morale and effective work than an authoritarian atmosphere. For all these reasons the movement toward a democratic conception of school administration and control may be expected to grow in the years ahead.

Consensus vs. Majority Rule

Obviously the inclusion of a large number of individuals and groups, each

¹ This does not mean that lay groups or pupils should participate in the determination of all questions of school policy. There is, in all fully developed professions, a recognized domain of professional autonomy. In education this domain has not, as yet, been adequately defined or recognized. But the educational profession cannot afford to surrender professional autonomy within its own sphere of professional competence. See Myron K. Lieberman, Education as a Profession, Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1956, p. 87-123.
with somewhat different interests and perspectives, in the task of policy formulation requires some procedure for arriving at decisions which for the present at least are binding on all concerned. There is common agreement that in a democratic society the central core of this procedure is free and informed discussion. Traditionally this has meant open debate, compromise and majority decision under the rules of parliamentary law.

Recently, however, a number of educators influenced by studies of the methodology of decision making and of group dynamics have challenged the adequacy of these familiar procedures. The heart of this position is the thesis that wherever possible consensus should be substituted for compromise and majority rule as the goal of group deliberation. Compromise and majority decision, it is contended, do not really resolve the issues at stake nor do they truly satisfy all of the persons concerned. At best they achieve a merely temporary solution. Further, it is argued, majority rule retains some of the elements of coercion—it is, at bottom, a type of power struggle in which ballots are substituted for bullets and in which certain minority rights are respected.

Serious objections have also been raised to debate as the cardinal form of group deliberation. Disagreements about policies usually involve conflicts of interests, values and personalities, as well as disputes about facts. Debate, it is asserted, is at once too competitive and too superficial to deal effectively with such problems. Even a cooperative study of the facts, while essential to any genuine resolution of the conflict, is not enough. What is needed, according to this view, is a new way of conducting group discussion which not only takes account of the personality needs and human relationships involved, but also aids the members of the group to envision new solutions and to reconstruct their own interests, values and prejudices. Moreover, the students of group dynamics believe that they have discovered the rudiments, at least, of such a methodology.

As the readers of Educational Leadership know, this conception of democratic method has been widely used since the end of the second world war. But it has also been sharply assailed. Democracy, it is said, requires diversity rather than consensus. The democratic method is not a substitute for human struggle but a way of modifying and regulating struggle through open discussion, compromise and majority rule where collective decisions must be made. Indeed, there seems to be a distinct feeling that an emphasis on consensus would engender subtle pressures for conformity.

Further, it is asserted, the techniques of group management and discussion which have grown out of the "group dynamics movement" are unnecessary and dangerous. Values and interests can, and should be, broadened and tested by the same basic methodology employed in the verification of descriptive propositions—that is, through a rigorous examination of the consequences to which they lead in action. Insofar as the techniques of "group dynamics" depart from this basic methodology they are devices which may be used to manipulate people and to control thought—a fact which

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many who hold this point of view believe is unconsciously revealed by the use of the term “human engineering.” A few critics, in fact, have bluntly asserted that, regardless of the intent of those who employ them, these techniques are simply a form of brain washing.

Admittedly the conflict between the advocates of these two conceptions of democratic method may not always be as sharp as it has been presented in the preceding paragraphs. But it is clear that there are significant differences which must be considered by all those interested in promoting democratic policy formation. Obviously it is not possible effectively to explore in a brief article all of the issues raised by the “search for consensus.” I will attempt, however, to state a point of view with respect to three of these issues.

**The Need for Basic Agreement**

Despite the inherent opposition of democracy to enforced conformity of thought, any functional group—from a bridge club to the United Nations—necessarily rests either on naked force or on some basic consensus. It is true that a democratic society must honor diversity of opinion. It is also true that progress is possible only in a social atmosphere which encourages new and deviant ideas. Universal agreement at all points, even if it could be achieved in a complex, modern society, would not be desirable.

But it is a grave error to argue from these premises that the only consensus required in a democratic group is the agreement to disagree. Divergent opinions, especially where they involve different interests and values, mean conflicts over policy wherever common action is essential. Conflict, of course, is not necessarily bad. The fact is, as many sociologists have recognized, there are two types of conflict. The first, set in the context of a genuine community, is always limited, and is often stimulating and productive. The second, where this context is absent or present only to a slight degree, typically engenders bitterness, hate and a ruthless struggle for dominance. Shared purposes and beliefs, however, are the essence of community. Moreover, it is precisely these common ends and postulates which provide the standards by which disputes about other matters are adjudicated. Democratic cooperation, therefore, while it does not require universal agreement on all matters of importance, does presume a basic context of shared ends and beliefs.

**Consensus and Majority Rule**

As we have previously noted, a second point of issue in theory of democratic group deliberation, concerns the relative claims of majority rule and consensus in the determination of group policy. Here it would seem to me that there is a place for both; indeed, majority decisions may frequently represent an intermediary stage in the development of consensus.

If it is possible in the time available to devise a policy that is, in the fullest sense, acceptable to all of those affected by this policy this result would, I think, generally be regarded as preferable to one dictated by a bare majority. The achievement of a genuine consensus in a limited time, however, is frequently difficult or impossible. Needed facts may be neither available nor readily attainable prior to the adoption of some policy. Differences in values, interests and beliefs may prove too pervasive and too deep to permit the development of a common point of view. And, even if the objective situation would admit an ideal solution, the group may not possess the insight re-
quired to discover a policy broad enough to include fully all of the diverse interests and values represented by it. In this case the refusal to act on the bases of a majority decision means that action must be indefinitely postponed.

There are doubtless occasions in which it is wise to delay action rather than violate the feelings of a minority. But we must not overlook either the fact that an immediate decision is frequently necessary or that majorities may also entertain strong convictions. In these circumstances to insist that action must await consensus is to embrace, in effect, a species of minority rule. Consensus may represent the ideal solution, but in practice democracy cannot dispense with either compromise or the principle of majority rule.

Nevertheless it must be observed that this principle itself rests on a deeper consensus at two significant points. The minority must be willing to abide by the decision of the majority, while the majority must respect the right of the minority to work for a later reversal of the decision. In this sense, no major question of policy is ever fully settled in a democratic group until a substantial consensus has been reached. Policies, moreover, are ultimately tested in action. It is true that action entails consequences which are not always wholly reversible. But to a marked degree a majority decision serves to institute an experimental trial which, as it elicits facts not otherwise available, may move the group toward a wider agreement.

**Group Process vs. Scientific Method**

Despite the differences between the two conceptions of democratic method explored in this paper, there is agreement at one crucial point. Deliberation must be informed by a careful search for relevant knowledge and fact. There is no issue regarding the necessity for an accurate determination of the facts in the formulation of policy. But there are issues with respect to the adequacy of fact finding as the sole resource in deliberations about matters of policy.

First, the students of group dynamics insist that any adequate conception of the methodology of group discussion must include techniques which take into account our knowledge of human relationships and of the psychological needs of individuals. The purpose of these techniques is to develop in individual participants the human relations skills required to reduce to a minimum irrational obstacles to reasoned discussion. It would be difficult to deny that such irrationalities exist or that their removal would increase the effectiveness of group deliberation. It may be true that some of the techniques proposed in this connection could be used to manipulate people or to create subtle group pressures for a species of conformity which submerges genuine differences. If so, the proper remedy would seem to be the development of better techniques or of more adequate safeguards against the misuse of existing procedures. Obviously, where this cannot be done the methods in question should be abandoned. But the contention that some or all of the procedures so far suggested are not acceptable is not a valid argument against the study of group processes or the attempt to find ways to improve human relationship skills in the context of group deliberation.

Second, John Dewey consistently argued that, broadly conceived, the scientific method is the method appropriate to the solution of all human problems. On the other hand, Professor Raup and his colleagues have asserted that the methodology of policy judgments in-
eludes elements not found in the scientific method—a view which is apparently shared by many of the students of group dynamics. It is possible that the apparent conflict between these two positions is due largely to differences in the definitions of scientific method. Indeed, it is my personal opinion that Dewey’s conception of scientific method is broad enough to include the methodological contributions of Professor Raup and of group dynamics. But even if it is correct, this conclusion should not blind us to the possibility that deliberation about questions of policy may require methodological resources not ordinarily comprehended under the rubric of scientific method.

Questions of policy typically involve adjustments of conflicting values and interests. The formulation of policy, therefore, entails a whole range of problems not present in the determination of matters of fact. These problems are difficult enough in any case. Certainly we cannot afford to overlook any methodological resource which might aid in their solution. If, to take a single example, role playing will help to sensitize people to the interests and perspectives of others differently situated, then it is properly a part of the discipline of group deliberation. Hence, I would conclude there is much to be gained by a broad and thorough study of both group dynamics and the methodology of group deliberation.

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Is Consensus Enough?

This article clarifies the reference of consensus: what it points to and what the referent is like. It then considers how the conditions can be established under which consensus can run its course.

If consensus had not become confused with consensus over the past 30 years, the question of its sufficiency would not arise. For, disentangled from the blur of meanings into which it has fallen, consensus is visible as not merely enough, but as nothing less than the process by which warrantable conclusions and defensible decisions are ordinarily made.

But the confusion has occurred and has become more and more embodied in our thinking with the rise of sentimental liberalism and the consequent increase in use of cold-blooded processes of opinion formation. Our first task, then, is to clarify the reference of consensus: what it points to and what the referent is like. Once that is done, we can turn from the unnecessary question of its adequacy to a serious one: how the conditions can be established under which consensus can run its course.

Is Consensus Adequate?

Let us first examine the unhappy dynamic from which the mis-taken question of the adequacy of consensus arises. This dynamic begins with some debasement of legitimate processes of enquiry. One common form of this debasement we