

Power in the Classroom

James Rath

THE use of the concept *power* in the field of education understandably makes some people feel uncomfortable. Here is a clear example of the use of a well-defined concept of the physical sciences in the imprecise area of the social sciences. The notion of power, however, is sensed to a high degree in our daily lives and it is reflected in our behavior toward status figures and our conversations among peers. This review is an attempt to summarize some of the research work that has been done in this provocative problem area.

One of the interesting things in our culture about social power is that it is difficult to find a person who will admit he is powerful. The president of a large corporation would have us believe that any power in his company lies in the hands of the stockholders. The superintendent of schools in a like manner denies his own power and defers to his board of education as the actual holder of power affecting educational decisions. Even President Kennedy, in an impromptu statement at a press conference, suggested that he was disappointed in the gap between the giving of a Presidential order and its execution by the machinery of government. In a sense, he was saying that he lacked power.

Perhaps it is difficult to investigate power in a social system that induces in

its members such a reluctance to admit to power. It is interesting to observe that in Brickell's (3) well-known work describing changes in administrative practices in New York State the concept *power* is not used. In its place, words such as "influence," "strong agent," "change agents" describe notions that seem to be similar to that conjured up by the word *power*. Other reasons for an apparent dearth of research in this area are perhaps more relevant. First, as already stated, power is a word borrowed from the physical sciences to serve as a construct explaining some aspects of man's relationship to man. To my knowledge, this word has never been defined in an operational sense. This fact clearly precludes research studies in this area.

One interesting contribution to the literature of administrative power is that of Katz (7). He focused on the autonomy that different roles enjoy within the school system and outside the school system rather than upon the patterns of power and compliance. His model of autonomy may provide workers with fruitful hypotheses.

One of the predictions of Katz's model is that autonomy may be the greatest when compliance rules are most clearly stated. Maccia has suggested that one way to evaluate a model is through observational verification. Do the specula-

tions of Katz's model gibe with experimental observations recorded by others in the field? It would appear that the work of Moeller (1) would support Katz's predication. Moeller concluded that well-stated rules and regulations allow teachers to predict reactions to their actions, thus providing an effective basis on which to act, in turn enhancing a sense of power on their part. The absence of clear policy statements in schools tends to create an aura of unpredictability which detracts from teachers' feelings of power. This speculation is only a small part of Katz's model, and the findings of Moeller at best make the Katz model only a bit more credible. However, perhaps the approach dealing with autonomy rather than focusing upon power and compliance relationships will prove to be helpful.

Hughes (4; 5) and her associates in the Utah Study of the Assessment of Teaching identified the obvious superior-subordinate roles of teachers over students as one of the key aspects of the teaching process. The teacher was found by the Utah researchers to have real power. "In a very real sense," the study states, "the students in the teacher-learner situation can do, with approval, only that which is permitted by the teacher." Hughes *et al.* assert very positively that the reduction of the power component in the teacher-student relationship is crucial to good teaching. The research data offered in the research report of the Utah study indicate that few teachers were able to ameliorate the power components in their classrooms' interactions.

L. E. Raths (9) has taken a different view of power. He asserts that power resides in a group's status system. This notion suggests that power does not reside in a person (people are not power-

ful, *per se*) but that groups empower an individual through the dynamics of a status system. Raths' view is that, to promote productive groups, power within a group must be increased by clarifying and expanding the existing status systems. Raths' views, leaning heavily on the work of political scientists and sociologists, cannot be made explicitly clear in this column because of space limitations. However, several researches generated from this theory of power in a classroom may shed some light on his position. One of the main assertions of Raths' power theory is that when existing status systems are supported by leaders' decisions, then the group is able to function much more efficiently and productively.

Bogen (2) tested an aspect of this *prediction* using a causal comparison design. He dichotomized a population of teachers into the two extremes of student-teacher rapport. His research hypothesis asserted that differences would exist between these groups in the accuracy with which they perceived the status systems operating in their classrooms. It was predicted that the teachers who had developed a high teacher-pupil rapport in their classes would more accurately perceive the existing status-systems than those teachers with poor teacher-student rapport. The teacher-student rapport in classrooms was assessed by repeated observations making use of the Wrightstone Pupil Teacher Rapport Scale. Status systems as perceived by teachers and by students were measured by teachers and students, independently completing a self-report instrument based on Lasswell's dimensions of power. The findings were not totally consistent with the theory. While differences were found for the most part in the predicted direction, most differ-

ences were not significant. It is a reasonable assumption that the design of this experiment did not test the theory fairly. The sample size was so small that the design lacked power. It would appear that this study is an ideal one for replication and it is hoped that readers of this column will feel encouraged to undertake the task of giving the power theory an exacting but fair test.

In a second study related to this theory, Polansky (8) hypothesized that in classrooms in which morale was high, teachers would tend to support the existing status systems and that teachers in classrooms with low morale would tend not to support the existing status systems. Polansky's study made use of a modified Whitall's categories for classifying teachers' statements as learner supportive, teacher supportive, or neutral. The findings of this experiment tended to support the hypothesis. However, the results must be qualified because some of the observed differences may be explained by chance factors.

In a fashion similar to Bogen's study, this design lacked the power to test fairly the theory and this study also bears replication.

We have reported views of different classroom phenomena in which the word *power* is used to describe or explain what is going on. I would like to introduce a third context in which the word *power* may be used. A simulation study by Johnson (6), designed to identify some determinants of the teacher's perceptions of causation, indicates to me that teachers, while having a great deal of power, in Hughes' sense, actually feel quite powerless in the teaching-learning situation.

Johnson found that when a bright child achieved well or a slow student achieved poorly, the teachers were reluc-

tant to accept either praise or blame for these outcomes. Instead, the indications of growth or the lack of growth were attributed by teachers to the children's ability levels. On the other hand, when a slow child did well, or a bright child did poorly, teachers tended to use labels attributing to students unusual factors (e.g., high motivation, underachieving) to explain the disparity. Thus in *not one* of these extreme cases did the teacher accept credit or feel that he could have done better. Many times I have heard teachers say that they do feel powerless in their job—not so much when they are teaching, but when they are attending classes at a College of Education or in in-service meetings in their schools. Do the "oughts" and "shoulds" of education professors make teachers feel powerless? Perhaps this is an idea that merits testing.

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—JAMES RATHS, *Assistant Director, Bureau of Educational Research and Field Services, University of Maryland, College Park.*

Pressures—Ackerman

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and some have nutrition problems. It is very difficult in some cases for pupils to be able to concentrate if they have physical problems. Teachers must know how pupils grow, develop, and what physical limitations each young person has in order to teach him.

Problems of Youth

Most teachers are disturbed when pupils do not make the proper progress in school. Thus teachers spend much time and effort in helping all pupils to learn as much as is possible for them to learn.

Emotional problems of youth are often almost impossible for teachers to cope with. Teachers know that a disturbed or broken home has a definite effect on pupils. Because classroom teachers are not trained to handle such emotional problems, specialists have been provided to help teachers. These are social workers, psychologists, and teachers for exceptional children. Even these are not reaching all those who need to be helped.

In modern living, adjustments to social environment are important. Teachers are concerned with many of the little prob-

lems which cause youth to have difficulty in making such adjustments. Teachers with a truly professional attitude become frustrated by their inability to help these pupils and this results in further pressure upon these teachers.

Ability to communicate to all parents about their children is limited. Teachers attempt continuously to inform parents of the progress and limitations of their children, but meet with limited success in this overture. Parents cannot always comprehend or accept the true picture of their children. Therefore, teachers again become frustrated.

Despite these and many additional pressures, today's teachers are performing a yeoman service for society. Society should assist and encourage the foresight of today's professional teacher.

Editorial—Drummond

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ership for human change is to develop educational institutions which surround learners with love, patience, support, understanding, guidance toward responsible use of freedom, opportunity to make mistakes without loss of standing, and challenges commensurate with their maturity and abilities. Within such settings, commitment to basic human values will continue to be developed in succeeding generations of young Americans. Within such settings, human personality will be treasured, differences will be accepted and cherished, hard work will be willingly undertaken because of goals clearly perceived, and feelings of goodwill toward all men will naturally grow.

—HAROLD D. DRUMMOND, *Chairman, Department of Elementary Education, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, and President, ASCD.*

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