

Intervention Within Uncrystallized Groups

DAVID W. JOHNSON *
LINDA B. JOHNSON

IN MANY communities groups of parents, students, teachers, or interested residents have organized to advocate or to resist changes in the schools. The increasing militancy of such groups both within and outside the school has many implications for school administrators. To some extent this militancy reflects the increasing divergence of needs, interests, values, and goals of the community and country which the school serves. In addition, however, the militancy of groups attempting to influence educational organizations results from the past failure of the school to respond adequately to the changes which have taken place in American society. Such groups would not be born unless there were major dissatisfactions or perceived shortcomings with the educational status quo.

Current conflicts between the schools and militant groups advocating change have both cooperative and competitive aspects. On the one hand both parties seek to improve the effectiveness of the school; on the other hand, there may be marked disagreements as to what constitutes effectiveness and, consequently, as to the ways in which the schools must change to achieve greater effectiveness. Each party to the conflict perceives itself as possessing special competence to legislate on disputed issues. A parent group agitating for control of teacher placement, for instance, might rightly maintain that the school is the servant of the taxpayer and that ultimate responsibility for the child resides with the parent.

The professional educator, however, responds that his special training equips him to make the better decisions regarding the child's education. The relative strength and salience of the cooperative and competitive elements in the conflict will determine whether it is handled constructively, through attempts to solve a mutual problem, or destructively, by mutual attempts at annihilating the opponent.

In order to ensure that conflicts are handled constructively, therefore, administrators may wish to intervene in groups advocating educational change. Many special problems are involved in intervening in groups which

* David W. Johnson, Associate Professor, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis; and Linda B. Johnson, Doctoral Student in Clinical Psychology, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

are at an early stage in formation and development. Lengthy discussion of techniques of intervention in an uncrystallized group is beyond the scope of this paper. Some of the problems of intervention, however, are examined here. It may be stated that, to intervene effectively in any group, the change agent must diagnose the interests and concerns of the group members, their goals, and their plans to accomplish these goals.

Definitions

Before discussing intervention in uncrystallized groups, it is necessary to clarify terminology. A *group* is defined as two or more individuals who are significantly interdependent with respect to accomplishing a mutually shared goal. The goal interdependence of the members of a group implies a set of group norms and values. These norms and values regulate members' attitudes toward and behaviors in accomplishing the group's goals, and imply a set of role definitions based upon a division of labor or a leadership structure. The degree of *crystallization* of a group is defined by the clarity of its goals, norms, values, and role definitions.

An *uncrystallized group* is one in which the group's goals are ambiguous and/or the ways in which the goals are to be accomplished are unclear. In an uncrystallized group, the norms, values, and role definitions of group members will not be clearly defined and, therefore, what constitutes appropriate attitudes and behavior for group members will not be agreed upon. An *intervention* is defined as an attempt to influence the group's goals, strategies for goal accomplishment, or structure (roles, norms, values). The person intervening is referred to as a *change agent*.

Cooperative vs. Competitive Relationship

One of the primary organizational tasks of the school is to adapt to a changing society. In these times of rapid social change it is not always clear, however, what changes the schools should make in order to keep education relevant and appropriate to the needs of the students, community, and society. A current example of this dilemma is the controversy raging in many communities over the school's role in sex education. Statistics indicate that venereal disease and illegitimate pregnancies among teenagers are very real social concerns. Less clear are strategies for coping with these problems.

Groups which have organized either within or outside the school to influence educational change are potentially major resources. Such groups can help in diagnosing the changes needed in order to offer a relevant educational program. For example, consultation with leaders of the black community is an invaluable resource to the administrator attempting to introduce Afro-American culture into the curriculum. If the school administration becomes caught up in a destructive cycle of escalating conflict with groups advocating change, however, resources needed for meaningful change will be lost.

Deutsch (1965)¹ demonstrated that if the cooperative elements of a conflict predominate, the parties are likely to be relatively open and unde-

¹ M. Deutsch, "Conflict and Its Resolution." New York, N.Y.: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1965. Mimeographed.

fensive in their communication, to have a trusting and responsive attitude to each other's requests and suggestions, and to perceive themselves as having similar interests, beliefs, and attitudes. They are more likely to face disagreements and conflicting interests as mutual problems to be solved openly and to recognize the importance of being responsive to the needs of both sides. If the competitive elements of a conflict dominate, however, the parties are likely to be guarded and defensive in their communication, to perceive themselves as having opposite interests, attitudes, and beliefs, to be suspicious and unresponsive to the other's requests and suggestions, and to have a tendency to escalate the conflict, resorting to coercion and the use of power tactics when controversy develops.

In a competitive context the mutual interests of both parties are sacrificed; the educational process, for example, is disrupted by strikes, boycotts, or expulsions when the opponent is seen as beyond the reach of rational discussion and negotiation. The ability of the school to communicate effectively with groups militantly advocating change, to influence their approaches to changing the school, and to deal with differences of opinion constructively, therefore, rests upon its ability to strengthen and make salient the cooperative bonds between the group and the school.

Intervention Within Uncrystallized Groups

Many groups which militantly advocate change in schools are born out of individuals' felt frustrations, anxieties, and convictions that something is drastically wrong with the present educational system. The failure of urban schools to educate adequately the lower class minority group students, for example, is clear to most persons, but the reasons for the schools' failure and the remedies for such failure are, on the whole, ambiguous.

From the standpoint of the school's attempting to utilize the resources of groups advocating educational change to improve the functioning of the school, the ideal group with which to work is well-crystallized, is flexible in its approach to educational problems, and perceives its relationship with the school to be cooperative. Until a group advocating change formulates specific goals, it is likely to deal with its conflict with the schools in destructive ways, merely expressing hostility and frustration toward the school instead of articulating its concerns and acting as a resource in helping administrators to diagnose present inadequacies and to develop possible remedies. Likewise, the school will be unable to demonstrate that it is attempting to facilitate the accomplishment of the group's goals unless the goals are clear and the strategies for accomplishing them are specified.

In order for the school to form a stable cooperative relationship with groups advocating change, the groups must have a relatively stable structure. When the role definitions of the group, for example, are constantly changing, it is difficult to work out a durable agreement. For example, the individuals with whom the school administrators deal may quickly lose their leadership positions, leaving new leaders with whom the school's personnel must begin anew. Similarly, with hazy group norms and values, members may perceive cooperative attitudes and behavior appropriate one day and competitive ones appropriate the next. The internal dissension

often characteristic of young groups, furthermore, may stimulate a competitive stance toward changing the school as a means for increasing the group's cohesiveness and stabilizing its structure.

Before any group can function effectively it must develop relatively clear objectives, specific strategies for accomplishing its objectives, and a stable and viable group structure. The primary focus of any relatively uncrystallized group, therefore, will be clarification of its goals, planning strategies for accomplishing its goals, and increasing agreement on norms, values, and role definitions. The black power movement can be seen as an attempt to do this with the black communities across the country.

It is at this point in group formation that a cooperative or a competitive stance toward the school may be adopted. The focus of school administrators' intervening within relatively uncrystallized groups should be upon helping the group clarify and stabilize its goals, strategies, and structure so that the cooperative elements of the group's conflict with the school will dominate the relationship between the two parties.

In order to form cooperative relationships with groups militantly advocating change, a school administration must demonstrate its openness to change. It must also show greater concern with improving the relevancy of education than with squelching opposition and suppressing problems.

The school administrator who wishes to intervene in groups pressing for change will, therefore, enter the relationship, not in terms of manipulating, controlling, or taking over the group, but rather to listen carefully to what the group can teach him about improving the school's functioning. From this vantage point, given a stable leadership in the group which is primarily concerned with improving the school and given clear group norms legitimizing cooperating with the school, it will be possible to define a mutual problem toward which joint efforts can constructively proceed. □

Changing Supervision for Changing Times

Addresses from the 24th Annual Conference

Chicago, Illinois

March 16-20, 1969

By

Richard L. Foster

Harry S. Broudy

Muriel Crosby

Jacqueline Grennan Wexler

\$2.00

pp. 70

NEA Stock Number: 611-17802

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA

1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036

Copyright © 1969 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.