



# POWER and the Powerless

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"POWER" is an elusive term. Perhaps the reason for the difficulty in examining power and its effect within the educational setting is that power traditionally is associated with authority. While power and authority do have a kinship, fundamentally these are separate conditions within schools or any other system of operation. Supervisors of curriculum are well aware of this as they proceed in their day-to-day activities. As supervisors seek to make curriculum modifications, changes, and improvements, they recognize that authority from the state and local boards must support them, that their power depends on their ability to lead others in conceptualizing and carrying out new curriculum designs.

Supervisors also will recognize that a number of powers exist in other elements of the system which can stymie and frustrate their endeavors. There is the informal power of the community which can prevent change. Likewise, the informal and formal power of the teachers, when they are antagonistic, can completely subvert change or improvement processes. Perhaps a little more subtly, in most, but certainly not all educational settings, there is the power of the student to retard or promote educational growth and improvement. In other words, at one time or another under various types of conditions, all members of educational settings are both powerful and powerless.

Today we need to examine current educational themes and the supervisor's position

in carrying out his function as change agent for educational program improvement in relation to the effects of teacher militancy and student unrest. Let us look at power as the maximum responsibility to help others make the most significant contributions possible in their educational setting. This kind of definition suggests that in today's educational setting the effective curriculum supervisor must rely on a base of expertise in program development to a far greater extent than has been necessary in the past. The supervisor must be intellectually and perceptually astute in analyzing the educational circumstances of his environment and conceptualize significant and relevant improvements to the program. Further, he must have the personal insight and understanding of process development which will enable him to guide and help others achieve implementation. No longer is it possible for the curriculum supervisor's power to rest on a position of authority which requires compliance. It simply is a fact that such authority has been eroded over the years and has not existed, to the extent generally thought, for quite some time. The writer believes that this is a positive development in the sophistication of the educational systems of our country. This may be unsettling; it may create a great deal of anxiety on the part of

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participants; still, I think it is a constructive development.

## Negative Power

In educational settings where supervisory power is based on an authoritative relationship to staff, the staff's counterbalancing influence could be termed negative power. Such power is exhibited through passive, unenthusiastic compliance to the performance of new educational schemes and negative, unsubstantiated criticism publicizing the weaknesses in proposals, rather than the staff's exerting efforts to overcome such weaknesses in an enthusiastic promotion of educational betterment within any given school system. Such negative power is unsatisfactory and dehumanizing, and contributes a great deal to teacher militancy. There probably is little question that the basic cause of overt teacher militancy is the need for improving teacher welfare. However, I believe that in today's educational setting the successful must recognize that the authority given to the teacher-activist by a majority of the teaching staff is based on the fact that for too long the majority of the faculties in public schools enjoyed far too much negative power and far too little positive power; also that supervisors enjoyed too much authoritative power and exerted too little positive power.

In order for a supervisor to make the most significant contribution to his educational program, he must direct his major effort to seeking organizational changes within his system to increase the potential for individual positive power on the part of the staff members. The negotiation process has resulted in greater staff-state equality concerning the formal arrangements of a school system's operation. Obviously, the supervisor still will play a considerable role in these formal arrangements. Formal arrangements, however, are set up to give stability and continuity to a system. The improvement and development of a more powerful and more effective organization come primarily from the informal arrangements within the system.

The greater the individual positive power of staff members within the organization, the more potential there is for the supervisor to identify individuals who will implement new curriculum with greater personal dedication and commitment. Such a condition results when the individual staff member has the power to make significant decisions concerning his practice. Such freedom helps the curriculum supervisor, for it sets the tone of his relationship with the staff members on a positive base. His staff associates know they are not forced to accept the guidance and help of the curriculum supervisor; such knowledge puts them in a position to listen and to act positively on the supervisor's guidance. Such a setting is advantageous to the supervisor, for it allows him to act in an advisory, rather than authoritative relationship. This type of relationship is a necessity in developing a truly strong system of education.

## Student Unrest

At the secondary level, student unrest seems to be based primarily on the desire of students to be involved to a far greater degree than has been true in the past. Student unrest probably will affect the supervisor's position to a greater extent than teacher militancy. This assumption is based on the speculation that, in the near future, either formal or informal negotiations will be established in which the supervisor will work as a mediation agent between students and staff. This probably will result in the students' becoming a powerful ally and asset to the supervisor seeking educational reform, once true authority has been granted for student involvement in a decision-making process in the educational setting.

In seeking to maximize the student's effectiveness in making his most significant contribution to the educational program, we need to examine the possible reasons for the student's seeking this kind of involvement. We might recognize that as an adult society we have created an artificial developmental stage in child growth. That artificial stage is called "adolescence," and involves students

during a period from approximately 12 to 18 years of age. We are well aware that in many societies when one leaves childhood and achieves young adulthood, the event is acknowledged through some ritual. In our society, with its advanced level of technology, requiring more educational maturity for productive involvement, we have a concept which generally is treated in literature as the "adolescent developmental stage." The chief condition of this stage is alienation from the adult productive society.

When the adage "a child should be seen and not heard" was coined, the circumstances surrounding young adulthood were entirely different. Whether the child found himself in the country, village, or city, he was an economic necessity. Affluence had not spawned its problems or assets. Mechanization had not significantly reduced the labor of man. The young person was needed to till the soil, to take his shift in the "Mom and Pop" store, to supplement the family income so that minimum subsistence could be maintained. Thus, although he may not have been significantly involved in decision-making processes concerning his own welfare, he was a vital part of society—making a significant contribution, welcomed rather than alienated, and a producer as well as a consumer. It is my belief that these changing conditions have resulted in the young adult's desire to become more intimately involved with the decision-making process that affects his life.

I believe an effort should be made to establish a more meaningful dialogue which will overcome the youth's alienation from society, increase society's acknowledgment of him as a human being, and aid in providing purpose and involvement as he prepares for full participation in the adult society. I further believe that the young adult's alienation from society has produced a cynicism which has resulted in the initial confrontation between the adult and the young adult society. This cynicism relates to the hypocrisies practiced in our social order, and simply represents a means of achieving power and having something to say about what, to the young, is the endless preparation period required for full participation in

the nation's affairs. Based on these assumptions, it would seem that the successful curriculum supervisor should seek to establish a means of formal communication between the students and himself, other staff members, and advisory services in the community.

In order that these communications may result in the greatest productivity, it would be important for students to have a wider variety of experiences outside the schools. Often communication between the adult and the young adult societies is characterized by a lack of reality on the part of the young adult, simply as a result of his alienation from the day-to-day activities of the world of work. In order to accomplish productive communication, the curriculum supervisor might seek to promote a vast array of work-study programs and other kinds of cooperative educational enterprises involving the business and industrial communities in close partnership with the schools. Many of these partnerships might be less concerned with vocational preparation, which has been their customary purpose, and far more concerned with meaningful student participation and appreciation of the complexity of our technological society.

At the same time, such participation should result in the lowering of student anxieties concerning potential for meaningful productive participation in the society as formal preparation is continued.

It would seem that in the current educational setting the power of the curriculum supervisor is based, to a great extent, on the development of power for others. Power needs to be secured for the individual teacher, enabling the curriculum supervisor to provide leadership for improvement of the school setting outside the formal, stability-producing, authority-oriented aspects of a school system. Power needs to be developed for the student, enabling the curriculum supervisor to involve him in participatory practices with the adult society and meaningful dialogue in the decision-making process to overcome his alienation.

The power of a successful curriculum supervisor will depend on the development of power for others. □

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