
Just as the public school teacher has begun the quest for greater authority, the age of consultation has begun. Hazards for the teacher abound. But so do opportunities for a wider role.

Teacher Authority Over the Curriculum?

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AS NEVER before, American public school teachers seek to expand their authority over their work, the core of which is the curriculum. Paradoxically, as their quest intensifies, professional authority in general is under increasingly heavy attack. Teachers and their organizations are not escaping from this attack, and there is strong reason to believe that the authority they seek will be shared by others.

The Quest for Authority

The heart of professionalism is the right of members of an occupation, both individually and through their organizations, to have substantial control over the work in which they have received special training.¹ Their right rests on their possession of knowledge which is unshared by laymen, who consequently cannot adequately judge the professional's activities.

For public school teachers, claims to

¹ Wilbert E. Moore. *The Professions*. New York: Russell Sage, 1970.

professionalism encompass substantial power over the curriculum. Yet in the past, the voice of the teacher in curricular matters has been muffled by the activities of groups outside the area of public school teaching. On issues involving what was or was not to be taught, many school boards have given more attention to clamorous community groups or individuals than to teachers or their organizations. High school curricula have been dictated in large measure by institutions of higher education. Business firms, private foundations, private study committees, and federal agencies have exerted strong influence over the curriculum of the public school.²

² Roald F. Campbell and Robert A. Burnell, editors. *Nationalizing Influences on Secondary Education*. Chicago: Midwest Administration Center, 1963; Jack Culbertson et al. *Preparing Educational Leaders for the Seventies*. Columbus, Ohio: University Council on Educational Administration, 1969. pp. 58-181.

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By the 1960's, as the power of these bodies appeared to be growing, teacher organizations began their battle for greater teacher authority. Openly admitting the past weakness of teachers with regard to the curriculum, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers bitterly attacked the incursion of "nonprofessional" people into curriculum-making.³ By the beginning of the 1970's the curriculum had become an issue of considerable importance in collective negotiations between teachers and school boards.⁴

Problems

As teacher organizations have demanded greater teacher authority over the curriculum,

³ T. M. Stinnett. *Turmoil in Teaching*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958. p. 213; David Selden. "The Future of Education According to the USDE." *American Teacher*, Special Supplement, March 1967.

⁴ Russell H. Ziemer and A. Gray Thompson. "Negotiations and Curriculum: NEA vs. AFT." *Educational Leadership* 31 (2): 102-105; November 1973.

they have acknowledged the right and the necessity of outsiders to participate in curriculum-making. Yet acknowledgment has usually been given in general terms, placed in the context of definite rights of teachers.⁵ This structured approach to outside participation is common to all professional groups; indeed it is necessitated by the concept of professional expertise. Yet the central issue of the boundary demarcation between professional and nonprofessional authority has been spelled out in detail only during such periods of crisis as that of the decentralization controversy in New York City—where the definition was disputed by the community.⁶ But the issue must be dealt with on a wide basis if perpetual conflict between teachers and non-teachers is to be avoided.

⁵ Roy R. Nasstrom. "Professional Expertise and Autonomy in the Public Service." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1971.

⁶ United Federation of Teachers. *A Look at School Decentralization*. New York: the Federation, 1968.



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The teacher cannot have substantial authority over the curriculum if the school's clients—parents, students, and their representatives—do not accept such authority. And in many areas they do not. The past few years have been characterized by the revolt of those served by professionals against the professionals who give the service. The phenomenon has been described as "The Revolt of the Clients."⁷ Minority ethnic groups, women, consumers, and others who have been excluded from power in society have begun to demand a share of such power. No professional is exempt.

The roots of the revolt may be traced in part to the general militancy of the times—the same militancy, ironically, that is manifested in the teacher's quest for greater authority—and in part to the failure of professionals to understand fully the basic needs and aspirations of the people they serve.⁸ Thus, the teacher, like other professionals, will have to surrender some authority to clients. Teachers' memories of long periods of vulnerability to external forces may make such a surrender unpleasant. But it would seem to be necessary.

The revolt of the clients is but one reason that teachers will have to share authority. Another reason is that many types of expertise are required to solve complex social problems. The failure of professionals to satisfy clients has been caused in large measure by approaches confined to the boundaries of one discipline. But no single profession can understand the ramifications of many of today's problems.⁹

Public housing cannot be entrusted solely to the responsibility of the architect; lawyers, physicians, social workers, psychologists, and engineers must take part in the

⁷ Marie R. Haug and Marvin B. Sussman. "Professional Autonomy and the Revolt of the Clients." *Social Problems* 17: 150-60; Fall 1969.

⁸ Heinz Eulau. "Skill Revolution and the Consultative Commonwealth." *American Political Science Review* 67 (1): 169-91; March 1973.

⁹ *Ibid.*; and Edgar H. Schein. *Professional Education*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972.

planning. Similarly, the design of curricula for ghetto children cannot be the responsibility of the educator alone; it will have to involve psychologists, social workers, architects, and others. Thus groups of professionals will join with the client in determining objectives. The teacher will share authority with other professionals in the future, it may be predicted, just as other professionals may share their authority with the teacher.

Outcomes

It appears that just as the public school teacher has begun the quest for greater authority, the age of consultation has begun. Hazards for the teacher abound. But so do opportunities for a wider role.

Consultation will not be easy, certainly. Client distrust of professionals will continue to cause problems, especially when the clients represent deprived groups. Conflict undoubtedly will arise among professionals, as each looks at problems in a particular way. Nevertheless, there are means by which authority eventually could be shared with a minimum of serious conflict. In the first place, special efforts might be made to allow professionals to explain their roles to their clients—in part done in urban areas by many teachers now—and to other professionals. In the second place, genuine efforts to establish continuous contact with clients must be made—attempted by teachers now in many areas. In the third place, clients must have a forum in which their views might be heard simultaneously by various professionals, who then might discuss among themselves their responsibilities. Finally, the education of professionals should include some attention to the disciplines of other professionals as well as to those disciplines dealing with the problems of clients.

If consultation is successful, the teacher's role in the curriculum will not be circumscribed as it has been in the past as a result of incursions by particular groups. The teacher will share authority, but it will be an authority that branches far beyond its present domain. □

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