

Decisions and Power Sources

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There have emerged several major and interrelated problem areas within which any discussion of contemporary educational matters may be set. In one form or another these problems extend throughout every educational system in the world today. In no particular order they are: the necessity of change and innovation; the extent of educational opportunity, both in kind and amount; the quality of education; and decision-making for education.

I intend here to deal rather briefly with the last, the matter of decision-making, from the standpoint of both localized versus centralized control, and lay versus professional control. In order to do this, I will look at the major local educational organization, the Department of Education, State of Hawaii, and then draw some general conclusions with regard to the power of educational decision-making.

The State Department of Education in Hawaii has sometimes been labelled a machine of sorts, and at the risk of over-extending or distorting this analogy, I intend to point out some of the various infusions of power by decision-making which cause this particular machine to move.

First of all, the machine is not just now being designed in the

laboratory. It is rather a vibrant and moving vehicle, sometimes only crawling, sometimes veering this way or that, but nevertheless a huge and human machine.

It is a public conveyance, not a streamlined and custom-built private machine. Its services are, at least in intent, free and universal for anyone who chooses to use them, regardless of background or state of educational potential. This fact extends the scope of decision-making about and within the system in direct proportion to what this society believes about individual rights and involvement.

It is interesting to note in passing that this public vehicle is probably regarded by the public in much the same way it regards the city bus system, or any other public conveyance; it is railed against, but depended upon; its every motion or route is questioned, but it is an instrument of movement and hope; it is used grudgingly sometimes, but it sustains the society.

The very size of our machine is important in pointing up the degree of involvement. Extending throughout the State, it serves directly some 160,000 students, utilizes the energies of some 9,000 employees, will burn, in Fiscal Year 1965-66, some 100 million dollars in high octane

educational fuel. Its variety of settings, of students and teachers, of actual classroom programs, all combined into learning situations is almost infinite. The machine itself is noted for its lack of uniformity, for its rich variety, for its awkwardness, for its smoke and rumbling, and yet for its wonderful achievements.

In pursuit of our analogy it should be pointed out, too, that we are not discussing a machine powered by simple internal combustion engine. The sources of energy are a maize of individual electrical impulse motors, external as well as internal combustion plants, and atomic pile reactors. The connecting links among these power sources are coupled by a variety of direct transmissions, fluid drives, big and little fly wheels and friction plates. The energy is transmitted, governed, and, too often, dissipated by brakes, safety devices and resistors by the dozens. Defective spark plugs and worn-out parts are always mechanical hazards.

There is understanding only in very general terms, perhaps, as to just what this machine should be doing. Although there is usually the assumption in various quarters that there is agreement about direction, speed, and passenger load, this is not always true. Too vast and complex for the easy answers and deci-

sions by a single driver, too pressed in its mission to wait for the stalling processes of "complete involvement," the machine lumbers on.

Let us consider, now, the not unusual problems of internal power sources and decision centers. We mean here the degree of localizing of decision-making rather than completely centralizing such power. There have been recent efforts, more or less successful, to shift decision-making to more reasonable levels of authority in the Department of Education so that responsibilities can be more truly realized. However, many examples of problems improperly lodged, or of responsibility avoided come to mind; a few might illustrate how and why decision-making power has been dissipated or mis-directed.

For example, school principals have had little if any decision-making opportunity in shaping a faculty to carry on a program for their given schools. Consequently, answerability for performance and program implementation has been blurred. This responsibility once given, however, must be shouldered. Another example is when program resource specialists take or are expected to take operational authority or implementation responsibility at the school, district or state level. This, again, makes more difficult and confusing the process of decision-making and the evaluation of programs.

There are what might be called "natural" areas of responsibility at any level; the teacher, for example, is expected to make classroom decisions on curriculum or supplies or discipline. The principal, or the program specialist, or the parent should not try to make these decisions. Further, it can be said that if any position is justifiable organizationally, it will contain within it inherent natural areas of decision-making and an appropriate degree of authority.

To recognize these, and to respect them, is the constant problem of leadership, of understanding roles. In keeping with our analogy, the generation and flow of power which moves certain parts of our machine must be conducted so as to avoid short-circuits, blocks, failures, and the confusion of multiple control.

An even more demanding difficulty in authority and decision-making lies in the external power sources. We mean here, of course, the primary sources such as the Board of Education with its advisory councils, the State Legislature, and the Governor, but also such secondary sources as the PTA's, the teacher organizations, community groups, etc.

The great differences in scope of knowledge and understanding, in degree of involvement, in extent of concern, among these sources, professional and lay, make it very difficult and trying indeed to understand each other and to decide upon anything. The usual pattern has often been sporadic over-control or under-control which makes for movement by fits and starts rather than in smoothly synchronized meshing of gears.

Past difficulties and failures in establishing optimum mutual confidence among various power sources have made decision-making very difficult, and in certain instances, impossible. The laity, and in too many instances, the professionals, have failed to realize how far educational decision-making has evolved from the relatively simple issues of fifty years ago. The machine in question deals with infinitely more complex problems, not only because of the amount of raw knowledge but because of operational intricacies and sheer numbers of people involved. Decisions cannot be made in the same easy way, and yet this fact is not always understood. When we begin to realize the depth and com-

plexity of decisions which must be made about each individual in this human machine, whether child, teacher, or administrator, it is no wonder that error and breakdown constantly threaten.

Major Areas

There are, for the purpose of this discussion, at least six major areas within the modern educational process, each of which falls to the more natural lot of one or more of the power sources involved. These parts might be designated as theorization, goal-setting, resources agreements, policy shaping, implementation, and evaluation.

It is evident that if the educational process is to sustain the accelerating demands made upon it, there must be a great deal of research, of philosophizing, of scholarly theorizing about the issues. This becomes increasingly evident as the impact of high-level scholarship upon the learning process is more clearly seen. It is also clear that the large measure of this theorizing and research must be done by institutions other than the operating systems such as the Department of Education, that is, by universities and other research establishments which must relate strongly to the society and to the operating systems as well. Although the practitioners should reserve the freedom to carry on a modest amount of research and theorizing, especially in operational realms, they should leave the major responsibility of theorizing to others not burdened with operational pressures.

Goal-setting and resources analysis (and involvement) should reflect, in large measure, the thoughtful and willing participation by the citizenry. Certainly in the process, there should be involvement of the professionals who must translate goals and resources into terms relating to opera-

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