Can We Empower Others? The Paradox of Empowerment in the Governing of an Alternative Public School[1]

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Empowerment is defined in terms of the extent of decision-making power that people actually wield in an organization. The concept is developed through an analysis of the participative decision-making of the Policy Council or governing body of an alternative public school, on which parents, students, and teachers were equally represented. The council failed to empower students and parents for two reasons. First, the council existed in a broader institutional ecology of inequality in which teachers were dominant. Council members came with significant inequalities in the roles they played in the school, responsibility for the school, knowledge of school activities, educational expertise, and control of implementation of council decisions. Second, the school's overall ideology of egalitarianism created organizational dynamics that made it all but impossible to overcome the impact of these inequalities. The authors concluded that although more careful attention to contextually based inequalities would improve the prospects for empowerment, there is a fundamental paradox in the idea of people empowering others because the very institutional structure that puts one group in a position to empower also works to undermine the act of empowerment.

The concept of empowerment occupies a central role in both political science and community psychology (Dahl, 1957; Lasswell & Kaplan, 1950; Rappaport, 1981). The idea of people acting to control their own lives is at the heart of democratic theory and is a major goal for groups in the broader culture who have been traditionally disenfranchised. Empowerment is one of the moving forces behind community-based planning processes, parent participation in public schools (Davies, 1976), community organizing (Kahn, 1982), and quality of life programs for workers in business and industry (Witte, 1980). What we mean by enpowerment, however—the ideas that define it and enhance it—are still relatively undeveloped.

It is the purpose of this article to further the idea of empowerment by presenting a case study of one social experiment in empowerment: the governing body of an alternative public high school on which parents, students, and teachers were equally represented. The school itself has been tenacious; it is still functioning 15 years after its founding. Yet its governing body, or policy council as it was called, has largely failed as an exercise in empowerment. Despite its egalitarian intent, even in its early years it operated largely as a teacher-centered organization. More recently it has either been dormant or revived as a PTA-like organization. The policy council's story is important, because, we argue, the problems the council faced were less rooted in the peculiarities of alternative schools than in the very nature of the process of empowerment. As such, the story highlights more fundamental issues of concern to the field as a new wave of reformers turn to new efforts at empowerment.

For the idea of empowerment to move forward, it must have substantive meaning that focuses and guides research and action. Psychologists, for example, have oft cited the importance of the personal variable locus of control as a proxy for an individual sense of empowerment, of feeling capable of acting positively on one's environment and shaping one's future. Interventions deriving from this perspective attempt to influence this personal variable and assess its individual impact over time (e.g., Langer & Rodin, 1976). Increasing choices or options has also been promoted as a meaningful definition of empowering people. Thus, flexitime in the workplace (Bohen & Viveros-Long, 1983) and the creation of public schools of choice (Fantini, 1972) represent another perspective on empowerment. For purposes of the present study, however, a third definition of empowerment, more closely aligned with political science than psychology, is employed; namely, how much decision-making power people actually wield in an organization. Here, the emphasis is on an analysis of those organizational structures for participative decision making, not on how empowered individuals feel themselves to be. As the case study points out, there is no clear correspondence between the availability of empowerment structures around decision making and the psychological sense of empowerment.

METHODOLOGY

The following case study represents one aspect of an extensive overall evaluation of High School in the Community, an inner-city public high school that began in 1970. The evaluation covered the first 4 years of the school's existence, and included the effects of the school on students', parents', and teachers' perception of the school, and the fate of various innovative school structures designed to increase empowerment. The vast majority of data on the policy council came from three sources: (a) verbatim notes of all council meetings for the first 4 years (1970–1974) taken by the senior author; (b) yearly interviews conducted with all policy council members – parents, students, and teachers – each year. These interviews covered such topics as perceived usefulness of the council, its strengths and weaknesses, and ideas about how it could be improved; and (c) yearly interviews with every teacher in the school ($n = 20–23$ depending on the year) about their perception of the policy council and its role in the school. Data on the more recent functioning of the council, as well as a retrospective analysis of its role, were provided by teachers to the second author during the 1983–1984 school year. The narrative thus represents the amalgamation of these sources of information, with the primary focus on the functioning of the policy council during the first 4 years of the school's existence.[3]

A Brief Description of the School

The High School in the Community (HSC) is an alternative public high school founded by a group of teachers in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1970. Typical of its time, it began as an antibureaucratic collective energized by an egalitarian ethic and a commitment to empowerment. As an organization, HSC was manifestly interested in all of the different perspectives on empowerment described above. Students were encouraged to pursue self-directed learning, facilitated by a Community Orientation Program which empowered students to develop their own curriculum with community resources. Parents of incoming students were visited by teachers before the opening of school to welcome them to the school and show that the school valued parent involvement. Teachers served as guidance counselors for small groups of students throughout the year in an effort to develop a more per-

[3]In September 1971 a second unit of 165 studlents was added to the original 165-studlent school. Each unit had its own policy council, but the operation of the councils and of the units as a whole was essentially the same. The councils were merged in the Spring of 1973 to reflect the growing coordination of activities between the two units. Complete merger of the schools took place in September 1974. For the purposes of this article, no distinction is made between units. Many of the specific details about the council must be omitted in favor of describing a more general picture.

sonal teacher–student relationship than had been true in the larger, more tradi-
tional high schools. When the school began in 1970, it had no principal;
rather, decision making was done by the faculty as a whole, with an effort
made to achieve consensus rather than having to vote on issues and policies.
In short, various aspects of the school as an organization, and the ideological
commitment of the faculty, fostered an environment responsive to the con-
cerns of students (see Trickett, McConohay, Phillips, & Ginter, 1985).

A Brief History of the Policy Council

In keeping with the effort to eliminate traditional authority relation-
ships, a policy council was created during the first year of the school to serve
as its governing body. Though initially all governance decisions were made
at faculty meetings, some key faculty members quickly grew restive with the
situation because, while the goal of a faculty run school was deeply held,
it conflicted with another faculty goal: empowering parents and students.
While students derived considerable power of choice through HSC's cur-
riculum, parents benefited little. Most importantly, neither group had struc-
tured opportunities to vote on matters of school policy.

By Thanksgiving of the first year the faculty's emerging interest in em-
powering parents was joined by practical considerations as the school came
under increasing external attack. Faculty, fearful for the school's survival,
saw direct parent involvement as a way of increasing badly needed parent
support. Moreover, including parents in school decision making served to
meet guidelines for federal funds for which the school was applying. Thus,
the decision to create a policy council was both congruent with the ideology
of the school and was seen as serving its survival needs.

The first council meeting was convened in January 1971, midway
through the school's first year. It included five parents, five students, and
five teachers, each with an equal vote on all matters of policy. In theory,
the policy council was indeed created to be *the* central decision-making body
of the school. Its bylaws, which the first council wrote, provided for jurisdic-
tion over the general allocation of funds, hiring and firing staff, policies about
discipline, attendance, and curriculum, admissions procedures, use of the
building, and any other issues the council deemed appropriate. During its
initial year the council showed promise of being a vibrant organization.
Against the wishes of the majority of the teachers it decided not to admit
ninth graders to the school. There was a lively debate over internal ad-
ministrative organization; in that case too, council decisions were implemented.
During the following years the council also showed that it could act decisively
and independently, particularly around issues of faculty hiring. One year the
council insisted on interviewing job applicants and rejected all candidates

for one position. Some faculty supported parents and students in this move, but there was strong faculty opposition as well.

Over time, however, the policy council became less consistently influential both in deciding what issues to deal with and in making policy with respect to those issues. Parents, students, and teachers increasingly agreed that the faculty, not the policy council, governed the school. By Spring of 1972, when the council was in its second year of operation, interviews indicated that many council members felt that faculty did not bring important issues to the council and that most of the issues actually discussed were trivial.

When issues *were* brought to the council, the faculty tended to dominate. A content analysis of meeting notes indicated that issues were initiated by teachers well over two-thirds of the time. Many students and parents took basically passive roles in discussions, speaking only when directly asked for an opinion. As a result, the faculy largely controlled not only the initiation of issues but the definition of alternatives during deliberations. At a meeting during the council's first year, for example, the council considered criteria for the selection of a new English teacher. One teacher reported that the faculty thought the person should be skilled in teaching basic reading and then threw the question open to the council. The parents responded largely by asking the faculty what they thought ("How do the staff feel? and "You're the one equipped to set criteria."). The students did not respond at all until a teacher prodded them, saying "There's another perspective not being heard—the students. Do you want an English teacher at all? Are there kinds of teachers we don't have?" Still, only one student replied.

Further erosion of the potential power of the council was found in the fact that, over time, more real decisions were made by the faculty and then presented to the council for feedback, rather than having the council shape the decisions themselves. For example, in the Spring of 1971, the faculty asked the council to approve an attendance policy already in effect. In early 1973 the faculty undertook a major administrative reorganization without informing the council. Such patterns eventually became so accepted that a January 1973 memo from a faculty member suggested that the council undertake a discussion of its role in the school and consider the question "Shall the Policy Council initiate as well as respond and approve?"

Eventually most faculty members came to feel that policy council governance was not merely a low priority but largely irrelevant. In response to multiple and conflicting demands, even people who had strongly supported the council in its early stages concluded that their time and energy would be much better spent working with sutdents and developing the program. They also developed serious reservations about the quality of council decisions. By the Spring of 1974, interviews with several teachers revealed that they "don't trust parents...they would have to get their own data and experience it themselves" and that they "...wouldn't want the school run by

parents because they're not in the school enough." Barely 2 years earlier one of these same teachers had told an interviewer that he was "dissatisfied" because the school "had not yet been able to spread authority to the policy council."

HSC's faculty also became wary of council action when they felt it would jeopardize the unusual nature of the school. Although the faculty were committed to the goal of empowerment, they were more committed to the school as an institution, and they saw themselves as the guardians of the school's educational philosophy. When issues arose that seemed to challenge the assumptions on which HSC was based the faculty rallied against council action. For example, the faculty resisted granting the council anything more than power over the general nature of the curriculum, not specific courses. One teacher warned that the council must ". . . be on guard about rejecting innovative ideas. . . . We need some restrictions on council power to protect the right of the individual to experiment."

These data on the changing attitudes of teachers over time were echoed by students and parents. The hopes and anticipations which had energized the earlier council meetings shifted to frustration over how the council functioned and how effective it could be. Attendance at council meeting – always an issue – became more acute, with over a third of the meetings during the 1972-1973 and 1973-1974 years failing to reach a quorum. By the 1973-1974 year, the council had so dwindled in importance and energy that it did not hold its first meeting until February.

INSTITUTIONAL EMBEDDEDNESS: MEMBER INEQUALITY AND THE TYRANNY OF STRUCTURELESSNESS AS CONSTRAINTS ON THE POLICY COUNCIL

In examining the primary sources of constraint on the successful operation of the policy council, we wish to stress two somewhat different issues. The first involves various kinds of inequalities brought by parents, students, and teachers to the policy council and the second addresses the unintended consequences of the school-wide empowerment ideology for the functioning of the council. Although the first issue is more fundamental than the second, both mitigated against the council's intent and contributed to what we later describe as the "paradox of empowerment."

Member Inequalities and the Implications for Power

The manifest intent behind the creation of the policy council was one of sharing power equally among three constituencies and concretizing equali-

ty through giving each constituency an equal number of votes in decision making. Our analysis of the outcome of this idea, however, starts with the premise that political power is derived not merely from the formal properties of the organization (e.g., equal voting power) but also from the resources participants bring to the organization. Participants derive these resources from their positions in society more generally as well as their role in the particular institution. As a result, the creation of an egalitarian structure is not enough to insure that power is in fact equally distributed if, as is almost always the case, the distribution of resources outside the empowering structure is unequal. At the heart of the policy council then lay inequalities of roles, responsibilities, and resources. A discussion of each of these clarifies both the complexity and difficulty facing the policy council *and* the pull for teachers to hold the upper hand.

Role Inequality

A fundamental inequality brought to the council by parents, students, and teachers derived from the different roles each played in the school. Power at HSC resided in its faculty who had disproportionate access to formal levers of authority and to the potent resources of responsibility for the school, knowledge, educational expertise, and control over the implementing of decisions. As a result, council members had equal votes but brought very unequal resources to council meetings and consequently had great difficulty wielding equal power (see Swidler, 1979, for a discussion of similar issues in other alternative schools). Because the institutional context of the school gave so much power to the faculty, the initial grant of power to the council was not enough. If the empowerment was to be meaningful, the faculty had to bring relevant issues to the council, provide the information necessary to develop and evaluate alternatives, facilitate the participation of other council members, and then put council decisions into effect. As will be evident from the ensuing discussion, the amount of thoughtful planning and the expenditure of resources necessary to accomplish all these necessitities was prohibitive.

Inequalities in Responsibilities for the School

One direct implication of role inequality was the fact that faculty had both different and greater responsibilities in the school than did students or parents. When school district administrators had business with HSC, they contacted a faculty member. When outside funding sources were approached, they were approached by faculty. The school was founded by the faculty,

and its fate was ultimately on their shoulders. For students and parents, contributing to the success of the school as an organization was optional. For the faculty, it was fundamental, and linked to institutional rather than individual interests. As Polsby (1968) explained, "Institutional interests differ from the interests of individuals who are in institutions. . . . Individual interests are necessarily short-run interests. Institutional interests, however, exist through time; the proponent of the institution has to look to its welfare through an indefinite future" (p. 168).

These overall differences in roles and responsibilities were manifested in a variety of specific ways in the policy council which served to maintain rather than alter the balance of power among the three constituencies. Three specific kinds of inequality deserve mention: inequality of knowledge, expertise, and access to policy implementation.

Inequalities of Knowledge. The faculty's day-to-day responsibility for the school carried with it not only accountability but also access to information. The faculty were at school full-time and kept track of all school activities. In addition, they were continuously informed about relevant issues in the broader school system. Students were full-time school attenders but had neither the incentive nor the responsibility to be aware of policy issues both inside the school and in the broader school system. Parents, of course, had access to the least amount of information. Compared to other local schools, HSC, through newsletters, parent conferences, and home visits showed greater commitment to providing parents with information. Still, parent knowledge of the school was derived primarily second-hand from their children.

Informational inequalities affected both who brought issues to the policy council and who controlled the discussion of those issues. One parent expressed the feelings of many by explaining during a meeting that "one reason the policy council hasn't been more active is that students and parents are captives of the teacher group who bring up the agenda. If the staff doesn't bring up problems, we don't know they exist."

Even when issues were brought to the council, information deficiencies often prevented the various constituencies from taking independent action. Budgeting provides a clear example. Although the council had specific authority to determine the overall allocation of funds, parents and students felt powerless to do more than minimally oversee the budget the faculty proposed because they felt they did not have enough information to formulate their own allocations. As one father on the council explained at a parent meeting, "It's hard for parents to go to meetings every 2 weeks and feel they know enough to decide." When faculty members were interviewed about their dominance of the council, the most common explanation they gave was their command of relevant information.

Although the general content of the agenda was influenced primarily by the faculty, such was not always the case. In those instances where students or parents had access to information the faculty lacked, the council was in fact able to act independently. For example, a teachers' strike in 1973 resulted in the loss of several days of school and a faculty proposal for readjusting the schedule was presented to the council. Instead of approving it after minor discussion as was typical, the council revised the proposal substantially on the basis of information student members provided about probable student reactions. Thus, the kind of issue dealt with by the council affected its ability to function as a group of equals.

Inequalities in Educational Expertise. In addition to knowledge about the school and school system, teachers also brought a level of educational expertise which far exceeded that of both parents and students. Most parents saw their own lack of such expertise as a fundamental limitation on their ability to participate as equals in decision making. One member explained "I don't feel that I need to start running the school. The staff knows what to do. The council should just aid." Parents did not feel frustrated by this as they often did by their lack of information; rather, they accepted it as a reflection of the way things should be.

Parent deference was particularly evident in the area of hiring new faculty, even though the council was able to act independently on such issues at times. Almost from the council's inception, parents questioned their ability to participate in hiring decisions. "It's nice to have parent input; but except for parents who teach, we don't know what to look for. Only the staff can give a good evaluation of a candidate." Parents consistently pressed for screening commitees weighted in favor of teachers, and one year opted out of the process entirely.

Lack of relevant expertise also affected the students' role on the council. In this case, however, it was less a self-attribution of inadequacy than one imposed by others. Parents, and occasionally faculty, questioned whether students had the maturity of judgment to make some decisions, whether they had the proper "experience, background, and knowledge". While conceding that "student involvement is important in certain areas," one mother argued that "students should not make key decisions on how the school functions. This should be done by good educators with experience." Many such comments were made at open council meetings. Not surprisingly, students reported that they felt isolated and condescended to by adult members.

Inequalities Due to Control of the Implementation of Council Decisions. While parents, students, and teachers all participated in voting on issues in the council, the vast majority of issues and policies had to be implemented and supported primarily by the faculty. Without strong faculty support, implementation would either be half-hearted or fail entirely. This, too, con-

solidated power in the hands of the teachers who, at different times, urged either council deference or restraint on the grounds that in the end they were the ones who would have to act on decisions. In the Spring of 1972, for example, one parent brought up the possibility of changing the school from a quarter to a trimester system. A teacher urged that it was "dangerous" for the council to consider this issue before the faculty had because the faculty were the implementers. He won his point and effectively prevented council action on the question. While council members sometimes expressed resentment toward such faculty claims, and while faculty in general did not attempt to use this issue as a weapon, the real tension based on inequality of implementation power remained.

In these ways, the roles, responsibilities, and resources brought by different constituencies to the policy council all contributed to the unintended accumulation of power in the hands of the faculty. In addition to these areas of inequality related to the functioning of the school itself, all three constituences brought to the new governance structure a history of previous experiences outside of HSC which affected empowerment in the council as well. Teachers, for example, had never before been part of such a social experiment, and they were not fully aware of what constraints their role as teachers had on what they perceived to be an egalitarian structure. Nor were all of them sure that, as specific decisions emerged in which they had a vested interest, they really entrusted decision making to parents and students. Parents and students had also been exposed to patterns of relating to teachers in the schools which did not disappear with the creation of a more egalitarian school. And the egalitarianism had limits, for in the end it was still the faculty's responsibility to evaluate students and grant course credits.

Thus it was not surprising, as studies on leaderless groups have shown (e.g., Bass, 1965; Kelly & Thibaut, 1969), that the policy council tended to reproduce the status structure of the larger organization (e.g., the school system) from which the participants were drawn. Parents tended to look at teachers as school authorities who were supposed to provide leadership. They were accustomed to being involved in PTA activities, not policy making, and some openly admitted being hesitant to raise problems in the council for fear of antagonizing their child's teachers. Students, on the other hand, were used to bringing up gripes and suggestions in one-to-one meetings with teachers they could trust, rather than in an open forum like the policy council. In addition, the broader dynamics of adolescent–parent relationships intruded into the council meetings. As one student explained "Lots of students don't want parents involved for personal reasons. They don't want parents meessing in their business." Thus, issues and inequalities outside the school itself were brought into the functioning of the policy council, adding to the already impressive list of inequalities inherent in the roles and responsibilities of the teachers as contrasted to the parents and students.

The various kinds of inequalities described above were particularly pernicious for the council because they were cumulative. If each type of inequality had benefited a different constituent group, the structural equality the council created might have prevailed. But this was not the case. The institutional position of the faculty gave them a disproportionate share of most of the resources that shaped the informal power structure of the council. Moreover, inequalities increased over time. When the school was young no one knew very much about it. Information was thus more equally distributed, structural differentiation within the school was primitive, authority patterns were diffuse, and faculty members made a self-conscious effort to minimize distinctions between constituent groups in order to promote one HSC community. As the school matured and grew in size, an increasing specialization of labor occurred as teachers realized they could not fulfill all of the ambitious roles in their original vision. A secretary, guidance counselor, and administrative aide were hired, and the position of Facilitator of administrative tasks was formalized. These structural differentiations, while necessary to the evolution of the school, further segmented the requisite knowledge, increased the differential expertise of teachers, and generally increased the distinctions among the constituency groups on the policy council.

The Tyranny of Structurelessness: Organizational Dynamics Interact with Inequalities

Thus far we have argued that the various sources of inequality brought to the policy council by parents, students, and teachers made it almost inevitable that teachers would, in essence, control the council, even though that was not their intent. While those inequalities may have been sufficient to prevent the council from succeeding as an empowerment mechanism, the school's overall empowerment ideology and egalitarian commitment resulted in additional problems for the council.

Freeman (1972), in her analysis of egalitarian groups in the women's movement, described the "tyranny of structurelessness" in self-directed groups that coalesced around issues of empowerment. By adopting the position that formal group structures (e.g., leadership roles) perpetuated *in*equalities among members, such groups became "tyrannized" by the dynamics created by this decision, including a tremendous amount of group time and energy spent on their own internal processes and the emergence of *informal* leadership which was often resented and undercut. Her description of the tyranny of structurelessness fits well many of the organizational dynamics of the policy council, affecting both its process and its structure.

Born as a reaction to the bureaucracy and hierarchy of the large public schools of the time, HSC resisted the creation of formally differentiated roles

among faculty (e.g., there was no principal) and attempted to minimize many role distinctions between students and teachers. This school-wide ideology against formal leadership mitigated against creating formal leadership positions in the policy council. An excerpt from an early meeting concretizes how the over all school ideology affected the policy council's process and structure.

> *Parent 1:* Are we thinking of the purpose of the council? Is it a training group or here to get the school running? If the latter, we need the best leader.
> *Student 1:* There shouldn't be a permanent chairman and vice-chairman, they should rotate. A permanent person will have too much power.
> *Parent 2:* We need an organizer.
> *Teacher 1.* The chairman should have an overview of all policy council operations. We need a permanent person for this to make sure committees are functioning properly.
> *Student 1:* The chairman would wind up being a parent or teacher. One person shouldn't have that power. All should have responsibility. All should be equal.
> *Teacher 2:* I support a rotating chairman. It gives people experience. A chairman can have a lot of power.
> *Parent 2:* It's not a question of power but of coordination.
> *Teacher 3:* The policy council is a training area for all in it. It's unfair for adults who've had experience in other organizations to deprive students of the opportunity to learn. The policy council is an essential part of education.
> *Student 2:* We're wasting time. We're not dealing with the school's problems, we're wasting time with mechanics.

One can see in the above both the suspicion of power becoming centralized *and* the degree to which the council was forced to introspect about its own mandate as a function of its autonomy to define for itself what its job might be. This lack of structure and its consequences continued to plague the council over time. Although certain individuals managed to keep the council functioning through personal initiative and effort, no ongoing process for the selection of formal leaders was ever institutionalized. Thus, the chair frequently changed hands and involved little formal responsibility beyond calling and running meetings. Because no one was consistently responsible for getting things done, grievances, issues, and suggestions were frequently lost; resolutions were made and not followed; promised reports from committees and from the faculty often never materialized. Over time, it became more difficult to recruit council members for the position.

In addition to the internal dynamics associated with the tyranny of structurelessness, the council also lacked organizational resources necessary to provide structures necessary for its mission. It had no staff and no budget, creating serious consequences for the council's ability to empower parents and students. The issue of constituency representation highlights this broader problem. Teachers on the council, for example, could meet with fellow teachers daily to discuss school issues. Students and parents potentially had large constituencies whose mobilization might have served to counteract the

power of the faculty. To develop constituency structures through the council, however, both students and parents needed resources to organize and communicate meaningfully with their constituents. Such resources were never available.

The absence of such formal structures had psychological ramifications for members that reinforced the weaknesses of the council as an empowering setting. Unable to develop mechanisms to link with constituencies, participants came to think of themselves primarily as individuals, only at times as representatives of constituencies, and seldom as part of a meaningful organization. For example, one year students presented a controversial antiwar resolution for council approval. The resolution provoked an unusual split along constituency lines with faculty and students opposing the parents. In the face of this division, an influential faculty member announced that he was abstaining. In his role as teacher this may have been a wise move since he avoided strongly antagonizing either the students or the parents. In his role as council member, however, he might better have acted to seek compromise to remind the council of its institutional mission.

Thus, both in process and structure, the council suffered from the tyranny of structurelessness that so many participatory organizations must confront, a tyranny that was particularly oppressive given the problems that inequalities had created for the council.

OUTCOMES OF THE POLICY COUNCIL: AN UNCONSCIOUS LAST PRIORITY

Over time, the inequalities and lack of organizational support overcame the good intentions behind the creation of the council. Few people, regardless of ideology, have unlimited resources of time and energy to commit to an organization unless it provides some return to the individual either in the form of direct benefits from participation or in the form of costs to nonparticipation (Olson, 1965). In a voluntary organization such as the policy council, potential benefits include prestige, social compatibility, and a sense of being part of an important endeavor. The policy council provided such benefits only under rare circumstances.

During its first year the policy council was blessed with the enthusiasm novelty can engender. People were excited about HSC and about the council; they were willing to invest considerable energy to make the council work. As one father put it, there was a "sense of charter membership" but there is "less excitement in joining something already established." Although some disillusionment was inevitable, the council's growing reputation for ineffectiveness aggravated everyone's lack of commitment. As it became clearer that

the council was not truly governing the school, inducements to commit resources waned.

If the council provided little incentive to commit resources, it also exacted little cost for not doing so. Student concern centered on services delivered, or as one student put it, "things going on in the school." Student representatives did not see the bulk of council action – administrative detail, site selection, parent grievances, budgeting – as relevant to their primary agenda. For them, withdrawing from the council carried few consequences.

Parents too saw little cost to a poorly functioning council. Their experience with other schools had taught them to put their faith in the hands of educational personnel. Interviews with parents included frequent comments such as "parents are not supposed to have a say" or "I like to feel comfortable with a school but I don't feel like I need to control it." They knew the school would continue without a policy council.

More than any other participants, the faculty at HSC were caught in an institutional web that made the costs of making a focused commitment of resources to the policy council outweigh the benefits. The early years of the school were ones of wide-ranging hopes for the new school; of creating teacher roles that included not only classroom teaching but guidance, outreach to place students in community learning situations, and increased contact with parents. The policy council had to compete for resources with the many other ongoing organizational tasks of the school. Moreover, controlling decisions was a new experience for teachers and they found the prerogative difficult to give up. As the policy council floundered, faculty leadership stabilized within the school. The longer faculty members made decisions, the harder it became for them to envision that things could be done any other way. By the Spring of 1973, when a parent asked a faculty member "Are you afraid to relinquish power back to the policy council?," the teacher replied "It would be a complicated thing to do." Thus, in the words of one of the teachers, the policy council became an "unconscious last priority."

CONCLUSION: THE PARADOX OF EMPOWERMENT

What can be learned from a successful school's unsuccessful experiment in empowering parents and students in governing the school? We find lessons not only about paths toward improvement but also about the extreme difficulty of the process. The policy council's experience suggests that efforts to surmount contextually founded inequalities must be based on a conceptual understanding of the sources of these inequalities. In the current instance three primary issues emerge: (a) the selection of issues placed before the council,

(b) the boundaries set on the domain of issues for which the council is responsible, and (c) leadership in an egalitarian structure. As will be evident, the very concept of empowerment is paradoxical in each of these spheres.

Selection of Issues

One approach to improving the council involves guided decisions about the choice of issues for council action. Perhaps the most important rule for choice among issues is to seek those that minimize inequalities among members. Although many inequalities affected all decisions, access to information and expertise did not. Some of the most successful council action came when students had relevant knowledge not available to the faculty. On such issues, students felt that they had something to contribute and their contribution improved the substance of decisions. By seeking out more such issues and parallel ones for parents, both the apathy of members and the wariness of the faculty might have been diminished.

Issues that most deeply tapped areas of professional expertise, however, heightened the inequalities. It was on these issues that parents were most likely to defer and thereby undermine the equality of decision making. It was also on these issues that the faculty were most likely to be reluctant to cede power. Faculty reluctance to allow the council to discuss specific curricular issues suggests that HSC is no exception to Thompson's (1967) rule that organizations seek to buffer their core technology from their environment. The faculty clearly saw the council to be at least in part an external threat. Issues that called forth the threat seemed doomed to fail until the council had established its legitimacy.

Boundaries of the Council's Domain

A second contributor to the uneven functioning of the council was the very breadth of its formal power. It could in theory tackle any issue of policy it wanted and did indeed grapple wtih a wide variety of issues. However, although the policy council formally had broad authority, the governance of the school was not structured so that council action was in fact necessary on most policy questions. Given the enormous *de facto* power HSC's institutional structure provided its faculty, the absence of a well-defined domain meant that when empowerment conflicted with other goals, it was easy for the faculty to bypass the council. If the school's decision-making structure, however, had required council action at least under some circumstances the institutional advantages of the staff would have been diminished.

The Paradox of Leadership

The foregoing ideas for improving the functioning of the council imply that strong leadership is essential to the successful establishment of an egalitarian decision-making body. This may at first seem paradoxical since leadership bespeaks inequality among members. The policy council's experience, however, clearly shows that ample inequality was brought to the council naturally. Deliberate efforts to counteract the effects of these inequalities were necessary. As Lewin urged, to instigate changes toward democracy a situation has to be created for a certain period where the leader is sufficiently in control to rule out influences he does not want and to manipulate the situations to a sufficient degree (quoted in Verba, 1961, p. 218).

There are obvious hazards in pursuing a guided approach to empowerment. Behavior patterns established early may easily harden. Temporary patterns of deliberate nurturance may turn into patterns of fixed dominance either because leaders are unwilling to relinquish power or because followers become accustomed to that role. In this way a well-meaning effort to create equality may in fact produce greater hierarchy.

The costs of not pursuing such an approach, however, may be still higher. HSC's policy council was swallowed by the informal structure created by its institutional context. Other efforts at empowerment have met similar fates and their students have reached similar conclusions. As Freeman (1972) argued about the women's movement,

> Contrary to what we would like to believe, there is no such thing as a "structureless" group...the idea of "structurelessness" does not prevent the formation of informal structures, but only formal ones....This is not to say that the formalization of a group structure will destroy the informal structure. It usually doesn't. But it does hinder the informal structure from having predominant control and makes available some means of attacking it. [The women's movement should] disabuse itself about some of its prejudices about organization and structure. There is nothing inherently bad about either of these...to reject them out of hand because they are misused is to deny ourselves the necessary tools for further development. (pp. 152-153)

So too in the area of shop floor democracy. Witte (1980) strongly argued that

> One of the currently popular axioms of many work-improvement programs, that changes must come naturally from within the group itself and not be imposed by managers or specialists in organizational design, is clearly ill-founded, at least in the initial stages of a work project. There must be planning in the design of the work process, the structure of the jobs, and the ways in which workers will be trained in job skills and group dynamics. (pp. 133-134)

As a school, HSC succeeded at increasing both parent and student belief that they could influence aspects of the school that they did not like. Thus, they did affect the degree to which parents and students *felt* empowered

in general (see Trickett et al., 1985). They also created and maintained a curriculum for students that increased their ability to have and make choices about educational offerings. With respect to structural empowerment of parents and students in the governance of the school, however, HSC's policy council provides a largely discouraging example. The fate of the council repeats the stories of empowerment efforts in other settings. In a classic study, Michels (1959) examined the attempts of a political party to institute internally democratic governing mechanisms and derived what has become a famous "iron law of oligarchy." More recently, Yates (1973) chronicled the experiences of a variety of experiments in urban decentralization and found success in only a limited class of cases. Witte's in-depth study detailed similar limits on the ability of workers to exercise equal power with management due to unequal access to information, participatory skills and power elsewhere in the company. In the end he concluded that workplace democracy is in a largely losing battle with "the inertia of the existing structure" (p. 170). In none of these cases were the intended beneficiaries left powerless, but all failed to meet egalitarian expectations.

Being in such good company may merely suggest that HSC's founders should have known better than to expect that the policy council would really serve to empower its members. But HSC and its policy council avoided many of the pitfalls other participatory experiments have stumbled upon. The school itself was small, the council was still smaller, and thus the problems plaguing large assemblies and large, impersonal organizations should have been absent. The small scale of the school also should have lessened the loss of control in the implementation stage of policy making that participatory experiments in large bureaucracies encounter. HSC itself was an organization that emphasized equality, not the rigidly hierarchical corporation that Witte found worked so strongly against true worker power. When the council was founded, HSC was also a new organization without an entrenched power structure and well-honed standard operating procedures. Finally, participation was not thrust upon HSC from outside the organization but was initiated by one powerful group from within.

Because HSC's policy council was built on such potentially strong footing, its failures are particularly revealing of fundamental obstacles in the empowerment process. The policy council, like most such organizations, existed in a broader institutional structure. On the council, all members were equal, but in that broader structure, those same members were not. The council was created by the already powerful faculty; the council did not change the basic institutional forces that gave the faculty power. As a result, the faculty's act of empowerment was inevitably incomplete. To make it meaningful, they would have had to commit considerable resources to overcome the effects of the institutional context. If there had been few other claims

on the school's resources, this might have occurred. As it was, the demands of running the school were more insistent than the demands of the policy council.

Our overall conclusions about the process of empowerment are, thus, pessimistic. The institutional context that engulfed the policy council is typical of those facing most such experiments; the forces that discouraged the council's founders from working to overcome the impact of that context are hardly unique to one school or even to the field of education. Virtually all institutions divide labor in such a way that a disproportionate share of resources is commanded by some members. Virtually all empowerment efforts involve a grant of power by a favored group to others in the organization. Unless the favored group changes the very circumstances that have given it power in the first place, the grant of power is always partial. Unfortunately, the limited nature of the grant works to undercut the effectiveness of the group that has been empowered. This ineffectiveness, in turn, discourages the original power holders from working to expand the grant. Thus we conclude that there is a fundamental paradox in the idea of people empowering people because the very institutional structure that puts one group in a position to empower others also works to undermine the act of empowerment. The dynamics created by this paradox thus seriously limit the possibilities for this approach to empowerment.

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