

# Privilege, Power, Politics, and Schooling

---

3

Exposing the ties between the Bush and McGraw families and NCLB introduces the unsettling fact that privilege, power, and politics are rarely absent from school policy decisions. Educators who are allies in the battle for social justice know this, they go out of their way to uncover these lies, and they are diligent in broadcasting and counteracting the damage these profit-fueled, politically expedient, or otherwise misguided policies can inflict upon school children.

After considering how privilege, power, and politics work together, this chapter will make the case that power and authority are driven from two different assumptions and have two different objectives. It will conclude with several scenarios demonstrating how administrators and teachers can use their authority to create disciplinary and instructional procedures that minimize power relationships.

## **PRIVILEGE, POWER, AND POLITICS MATTER IN SCHOOLING**

Allies benefit from clear, nuanced understanding of the ways in which privilege, power, and politics intertwine, exert influence, and play out in the lives of school children. We have already looked at the notion of privilege, the behind-the-scenes benefits and advantages that place one group above another. With privilege comes power, specifically power *over* others. That power translates into the ability to make the political decisions that ultimately affect every aspect of what schools do: how they teach, what they teach, what they value, how they are organized, who gets disciplined, who gets labeled gifted, who gets labeled “in need.” The list is endless.

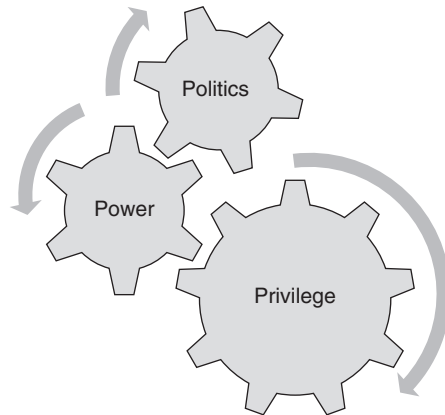
**Figure 3.1** Factors That Drive What Happens in Schools

Figure 3.1 graphically represents the ways in which privilege, power, and politics work together to shape school experiences.

An example from history elucidates the ways in which privilege and power work together to affect policy. In the days of the women’s suffrage movement, power resided with men, described as *captains of industry*, *breadwinners*, and *heads of the household*—all positional terms designed to indicate who has control over what and whom. Women, often referred to during that time as the weaker sex, “obviously” needed men’s leadership, prowess, and strength in order for them to be safe and adequately provided for. In and out of the home, men were in charge. Prejudice against women fueled discriminatory practices that were encoded in fiercely defended policies. Men could vote. Women could not. Institutional power resided with men. Women felt the sting of oppression. For the institution to change, women were dependent upon those in power, men. Many men became allies to the cause. They lent their access to bastions of power, like the newspapers of the time, so that women could fight their battle for suffrage.

### **The Pow of Power**

What matters to those in a dominant position is to exercise the *pow* in their power: the impact felt as the dominant one controls others, exercises personal will over others, or creates situations to demonstrate how those in control possess know-how, superiority, and merit compared to those who are on the margins, who have less power, or who are vulnerable.

Winning power and using it has reached epic heights. We see evidence of abuse of power in areas that were once civil, transparent, and open. On TV and radio talk shows, what once were *talking heads* are now *yelling heads* engaged in a pitched battle to control the conversation by

outshouting, interrupting, and silencing those who think differently about an issue. At Board of Education meetings, individuals and groups come to the microphone to denigrate others, monopolize discussion, or harp on a single, narrow personal agenda item.

On a larger scale, we see how power manifests itself as an addictive drug, especially in the world of politics. Government gridlock in the United States is deemed a favorable alternative to open debate about substantive issues. Muzzling scientists and cabinet ministers was the method of control recently exerted by the Harper government in Canada.

Institutions that make power the centerpiece of their operating system produce an organization of profound distrust, rampant cynicism, sometimes overt rage. Exercising legitimate authority, on the other hand, can rebuild trust, restore optimism, and reestablish serenity.

### **“AUTHORING” A NEW POWER RELATIONSHIP**

There is a difference between power and authority. Social institutions, like government and education, possess a legitimate authority as part of the social contract with their constituency. In a perfect world, this contract is organized to maintain order, provide services, and ensure fairness; in other words, to serve the people for the benefit of all. The people who make up social institutions like government and education would benefit from understanding the difference between power and authority. Indeed, the exercise of genuine authority could—and should—be liberating for all members of an institution, those who serve and those who are served by the institution. This happens if one understands and applies the original meaning of the word *authority*. At its root is the familiar word *author*. What do authors do? They create. They originate. They instigate. In its earliest sense, the word *author* meant “one who causes to grow,” as those who write, or have been affected by the written word, know very well.

The voice of authority is separate from the voice of power. Authority and power have vastly different aims. Where power seeks domination, authority seeks growth, the common good, what is ethical (Saul, 2014). Unfortunately, over the years authority has been conflated with power. The word *authoritarian* says it all.

Those who speak from and use genuine authority, however, are ethically and morally credible. Ethical and moral behavior demands attention to others, concern about balance, application of the principles of fairness. Those who speak from and use this type of authority are allies, workers on behalf of social justice. Their goals are to dismantle manifestations of power, dominance, and narrow interests.

## Educational Policy and Power

Educational policy is not neutral. It is often driven by less than noble motivation, a purposeful misreading of the human condition, and/or a desire to dominate. At the same time, there are those operating in the system who try their best to counteract the damage that adherence to official policies can inflict. The following paints a portrait of the way power and politics play out in school policy and practice. It is, admittedly, an extreme example. It also suggests the ways in which authority can be exercised to mitigate the damage done by these wrongheaded policies.

### *Police Presence in Math Class Does Not Add Up*

As I struggled to make sense out of the 2015 video showing a police officer picking up and throwing a student across a classroom, my social justice lens reminded me to consider two things. First, bad anthropology leads to bad school policy. Second, if the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. Why else would a teacher and an administrator call in a police officer to handle a routine school infraction and stand by idly watching a student being manhandled?

Bad anthropology, a belief that American school children—some of them, at least—are by nature evil and violent and need constant, robust monitoring, drove the decision to bring police officers into the South Valley High School in South Carolina, just as it has done in legions of schools throughout the nation. Not surprisingly, the darker and poorer the population, the more prevalent are heavy-handed policing, onerous metal detectors, and unforgiving disciplinary procedures.

This close relationship between law enforcement and learning is incongruent, it is closely related to the war-on-drugs and anti-violence-in-schools fervor that gave us “zero tolerance” policies, and it has been costly.

According to a study published in 2010 by the Advancement Project, American school children are now the second-most “policed” group in the United States, second only to prison inmates. A parade of disturbing data populates this report, most notably the shockingly high increases in exclusionary disciplinary actions and school arrests, often for minor infractions. According to the report, these early school encounters with the criminal justice system contribute to the increase in students leaving the school systems to become part of the prison system (Advancement Project, 2010).

In the summer of 2011, a group of high school students from the Chicago Public Schools decided to call attention to the excessive policing that the district had put into place in its schools. In analyzing Chicago’s school budget, they determined that the school district allocated fourteen times

more money for security and police services than for college and career counseling. If budgets are a statement of an institution's value system, then what the students uncovered is testimony to a value system sadly askew.

#### *Values Drive Behavior*

My first job after I left the classroom was dean of discipline in a suburban high school in New York State, a position I shared with a former physical education teacher and football coach. We were a strange sight: the burly football coach, affectionately known as *Big Al*, and the tiny, bookish English teacher. One of our first official tasks was to attend a full-day training session sponsored by the local police department, which was designed to teach school administrators and deans how to “take down unruly students.” Really? I thought. Not on my watch. Nor was it a priority on Big Al's, as it turned out.

We used to joke that every time there was a fight in the cafeteria, Big Al was elsewhere and I was left to deal with the situation. But, as Big Al pointed out, would the situation have been handled any differently had he been present? The answer, of course, was no. Both of us possessed a repertoire of tools and skills to defuse a situation, to appeal to what we believed was the inherent goodness of our students, and to demonstrate that we understood that teenagers are tightly wound bundles of conflicting emotions who often make bewilderingly bad choices. In short, we believed in cultivating relationships and in discipline with dignity.

### **HOW AUTHORITY CAN COUNTERACT POWER-DRIVEN POLICIES AND PEDAGOGY**

We were not alone. Over the years, I have encountered some of the most amazing educators, working in some of the most challenged communities in the United States and Canada, who possess a range of creative, dignity-preserving, and effective ways of addressing the inevitable conflicts, testing of the rules, and infractions—big and small—that take place in schools. And they remain true to their convictions, despite student handbooks, district policies, and legislation that aim to constrain their behavior to a narrow band of predetermined reactions and punishments and uneven power dynamics.

#### **Addressing Schoolwide Discipline Using Authority, Not Power**

The following examples demonstrate how several administrators have exercised authority, in the sense of authoring creative responses to the need for safe and orderly schools, as opposed to exercising power. In

fact, in many instances, these responses are a direct reaction to previously harsh, oppressive measures designed to control behavior rather than shape behavior. Although these examples come from the ranks of administrators, there is direct applicability to the ways teachers can address discipline issues in their classrooms.

- Some administrators take an understated, but affirming approach, like Ms. S., who greets students referred to her for any infraction with the words, “You know, we *want* you here.” Then she guides them to think through what they did and where they might have had a chance to make a different decision.
- Or take the example of the middle school principal tasked with reducing the number of incidents of weapons being brought into schools. He and two other colleagues were facing the same situation. His colleagues hired more security guards to patrol the halls. He brought in grandmothers. His school experienced the most dramatic drop in weapons-carrying infractions and violent incidents.
- And there are others, like Mr. D., who took over a middle school that was run like a prison. There were frequent lockdowns; violent encounters on and off campus; no field trips, clubs, or other activities. During his first year, two students found the decomposing body of a murder victim on school grounds. In a second incident, a gunman entered the school, threatened to kill a teacher, and robbed two employees. Undaunted, and convinced that his students were children who deserved better, Mr. D. created an island of safety in this sea of trouble. Today, the school day starts and ends with meditation to help students and teachers alleviate the high levels of stress that accompany lives lived in the unstable margins. A Community Care Team has partnered with local businesses and organizations to provide on-site counseling, before- and after-school academic support, Saturday programming, and a full range of clubs and activities.
- Finally, there is Mr. L. His school is not unlike Mr. D’s in terms of the challenges present and the transformation that occurred under his watch. Mr. L. begins each day with a reminder of the school rules. There are only two. “Be safe. Be kind.” For reasons of “safety,” the former administration welcomed a police substation on the school grounds. Mr. L. believed that this sent the wrong message to his students, many of whom had incarcerated parents. One of his first tasks was to invite the police to leave. If only other schools would extend the same invitation.

One of the messages these vignettes have in common is that seeing people *as* problems is significantly different than recognizing that all of us *have* problems. One is a condemnation of personal merit. The other is recognition of the human condition. The first orientation often results in imposing more and more rules on behavior. The second allows for enactment of creative solutions that present positive messages about student self-worth.

Before looking specifically at power and authority from the classroom angle, the activity in Figure 3.2 will help you articulate the difference between power and authority as portrayed in the previous scenarios.

**Figure 3.2** Activity: Power and Authority Reflection

Select one educator whose response resonated with you.  
 How did that educator's response minimize power relations?  
 How did the educator use his or her authority to create an alternate solution?

### Addressing Classroom Discipline Using Authority, Not Power

Administrators create and sustain the school climate. Teachers create and sustain the classroom climate. How administrators and teachers choose to orient themselves to the myriad policies and required practices that circumscribe their responsibilities is, to a certain degree, a matter of discretion. In most instances, sound judgment that works to create solid relationships with students helps circumvent the need to apply draconian, one-size-fits-all disciplinary policies or stultifying approaches to learning and teaching.

### A Tale of Two Classrooms

The start of the school year offers teachers a golden opportunity to coauthor classroom operating principles that lay the foundation for a socially just school.

Teachers and students know the importance of the first days of school for establishing expectations, for setting the tone, and for sizing each other up. Although rarely articulated in quite this way, teachers and students are keenly interested in figuring out the power dynamics when they meet for the first time.

Nowhere is this more evident than in how teachers go about setting expectations for behavior. Classroom management is a primary

concern of teachers. Teachers can choose to emphasize and exert power as their primary means of classroom management, or they can use their positional authority to creatively address the need for safe and orderly classrooms. Whatever orientation a teacher selects is driven by different questions, sends different messages, and has different results.

To highlight how authority can be used in the service of social justice, two approaches to classroom management will be contrasted. In the first example, the teacher attempts to invite students into the process of establishing rules for behavior but unwittingly ends up emphasizing aspects of power. In the second, the teacher uses her authority to reorient the discussion away from rules for behavior, opting instead to focus on the classroom as a learning and teaching community.

### Rule-Bound Classrooms Lead to Rule-Bending Students

Posters like the following can be found in many classrooms, and they contain much useful information about the teacher's approach to discipline.

**Image 3.1** Classroom Poster





*“Reading” the Walls: What the Poster Says*

If you look closely at this poster, you may notice several things. One of the first is that students had a hand in creating it. The poster is decorated with student-drawn symbols and images. Teachers often explain that they want their students to have some “ownership” of classroom rules. Based upon the wording, one can assume that the students also had a hand in generating the rules, another nod toward “ownership” and a somewhat common practice.

**Questions Raised.** Despite this intention, engaging students in creating a poster such as this raises a number of issues. First, spending time on a task such as creating classroom rules as one of the first things a teacher asks students to do to start off the year highlights rules and regulations as something of major importance. Additionally, it is hard to overlook the overall message implied by the creation of a litany of ten rules. By encoding as rules things like *No Bullying*, *Indoor Voices*, *Raise Hands*, etc., the implication is that students *engage* in bullying, *do not use* indoor voices, and *do not raise* their hands. In other words, the overall approach comes from a deficit model associated with student behavior: These students do not know how to behave. They require rules to remind them how to behave. Unfortunately, over the years, this is precisely the message that some students receive and can easily internalize.

**Possible Results.** In addition, trying to maintain strict adherence to a litany of rules is exhausting and rarely productive. Laying down rules often results in a strong invitation to break them. Rule-bound classrooms result in rule-breaking students. Some would call this a power struggle.

*Change the Conversation and You Change the Culture*

How different the message would be if a different approach were taken, if a different opening-of-the-school-year task were assigned.

**A Different Approach.** Many teachers begin with a different approach and set of suppositions. Many assert that they and their students are part of a powerful learning-teaching community. Students are then invited to enumerate what a learning-teaching community looks like, feels like, and sounds like. The message, the implications, and the outcome change.

This approach totally shifts the conversation from an emphasis on behavior and rules to an emphasis on learning, teaching, and community. It also flattens the power dynamic. The assertion that the teacher *and* the students are both and always learners *and* teachers evens out the power dynamic normally associated with the role of the teacher and the role of the student.

**Ongoing Emphasis on Learning and Teaching.** The task is generative. After students—and their teacher—make their first foray into describing a powerful learning-teaching community, they can continue to add to their list throughout the year. Regularly asking students to reflect upon what they learned about themselves as a learner, as a teacher, or as a community member clarifies expectations and sends a strong message about who is in charge. The expectation is clear: Everyone is a learner, a teacher, and a community member. The message is clear: As members of the community, they are all expected to engage in a cycle of improvement and deepening understanding about what these roles mean. The message that each person is in charge of becoming a better learner, teacher, and community member can be further amplified and reinforced by asking students from time to time to make a commitment to something specific they would like to do that would enhance their contribution to their learning-teaching community.

**How Is Social Justice Manifested?** In the first scenario, the rule-bound classroom, the power structure is clearly evident. Students need rules to behave and reminders about how to behave. Student-generated or not, the implication is that teachers are in charge of maintaining classroom order. Rules govern what is acceptable and what is not. Students are required to follow the rules or face sanctions. (Indeed, in many classrooms these sanctions are explicitly laid out. Often, those in violation of the rules are publically called out with their names on the board and check marks placed beside their names for each infraction.) These systems perpetuate power *over* others, rather than providing opportunities for self-governance and decision making.

In the second scenario, the script is flipped. Learning, teaching, and community are central and valued, as is each individual's capacity to contribute to building a stronger learning-teaching community. In the second scenario, teachers and students exercise power *with* each other, a hallmark of a socially just school.

Figure 3.3 summarizes key points about the differences between the two approaches.

**Figure 3.3** Comparison of a Socially Just Classroom and a Rule-Bound Classroom

<b><i>Socially Just Classroom</i></b>	<b><i>Rule-Bound Classroom</i></b>
<input type="checkbox"/> QUESTION: What does a learning-teaching community look like, feel like, and sound like?	<input type="checkbox"/> QUESTION: What should our classroom rules be?

(Continued)

Figure 3.3 (Continued)

<i>Socially Just Classroom</i>	<i>Rule-Bound Classroom</i>
❑ ASSUMPTION: The teacher and students are part of a learning-teaching community.	❑ ASSUMPTION: Students need rules in order to behave.
❑ MESSAGE: Our focus is on learning, teaching, and community, and students know how to contribute to all three.	❑ MESSAGE: If a rule is broken, there will be consequences.
❑ RESULT: Students “coauthor” a healthy, mutually supportive learning-teaching environment.	❑ RESULT: Students and teacher are placed in a power struggle.

Smyth et al. identified eight key characteristics associated with socially just schools. Socially just schools

- articulate their purposes;
- advance a concern for social injustice;
- continually (re)focus around learning;
- pursue a culture of innovation;
- enact democratic forms of practice;
- are community minded;
- display educative forms of leadership; and
- engage in critical literacies (as cited in Smyth, 2004, p. 19).

Figure 3.4 Activity: Key Characteristics of Socially Just Schools

**Reflection**  
 Which aspects of this description are evident in the ways in which discipline is approached in the second scenario?

**Addressing Curriculum and Methods  
 Using Authority, Not Power**

Teachers have the potential to exercise power *over or with* students in matters beyond their approach to classroom management. How they orient themselves to learning and teaching sends strong messages about who is in charge and how.

Ms. P., a newly hired English teacher, took on the challenge of trying to resuscitate a senior elective, Philosophy and English, slated to be cut due to low enrollment. The semester after she took it over, additional

Figure 3.5 Pedagogy and Social Justice

**Reflection**

Grace Feuerverger (2007) defines education as “a sacred life journey, a quest toward liberation.” How does the pedagogy employed by Ms. P. echo that sentiment and relate to social justice?

sections needed to be opened to accommodate the seniors who wanted to spend their last semester reading Kierkegaard and Plato, Confucius and de Beauvoir.

Her classroom was located in a dinghy afterthought of a wing that was added onto the high school during an enrollment bubble. “The Wing” was universally despised. Its hard-to-access, hard-to-heat, and dark series of classrooms was capable of destroying any enthusiasm for learning—but not in Ms. P’s classroom.

Walk into her classroom and you would likely not be able to find her, nor would her students be sitting in rows taking notes. Instead, she would be somewhere in one of many clusters of discussion groups, prodding students to stretch their thinking, consider alternatives, account for historical context, make sense out of dense and difficult language and ideas, connect ideas to their current situation. Famously, one student was overheard saying, “I am thinking so hard my head hurts!”

Unlike other high school teachers at the time, Ms. P. did not lecture from the podium, assign but not teach, or sit at her desk reading the *New York Times* while students were engaged in silent sustained reading.

**Beliefs About Power and Authority Guide Pedagogical Choices**

Orientation to learning and teaching, like discipline, springs from a set of beliefs about where power resides in a classroom and how learning occurs. Paulo Freire (1985) says, “Education is a certain theory of knowledge put into practice everyday, but it is clothed in a certain aesthetic dress” (p. 17). If your theory of knowledge is that the teachers or books or curriculum guides are the power sources of knowledge, then you clothe your teaching in the aesthetic of the all-knowing expert depositing bits of knowledge into the heads of the hopelessly uninformed students.

If you believe that students bring funds of knowledge into the classroom, you believe, among other things, that people are competent and they have abundant and diverse knowledge derived from their life experiences, family, and social networks (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). You might also subscribe to the notion that what people know is of value

and should be shared. In other words, learning is a social enterprise. If these beliefs fuel your conception of learning and teaching, policing students and exercising power *over* them is not an aesthetic in which you need to clothe your teaching. Instead, you might see that your role is to help students shape themselves as beings. You believe that children come to school already capable of reading the world. They are passionate and curious beings. Then your role as a teacher is to fire their passions and curiosity, to help them see the world through a critical lens, one that does not shrink from the reality that places some groups in positions of dominance over others (Freire, 1985).

As educators, we do not have complete control over every aspect of what happens in a classroom. We can, however, bend the rules, skew the orientation regarding what is taught and how it is taught, and twist the political and power overlays that attempt to circumscribe and keep in check what we know in our hearts is good for our students, what fires them up, what feeds their souls, and, by the way, which does the same for us.

### KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR ALLIES

- Privilege and power are intimate bedfellows dedicated to shoring up their influence through the enactment of policies that put their interests first and the greater good second, if at all.
- Privilege, power, and politics comprise a potent stew that exerts a seemingly inescapable influence on how learning and teaching plays out.
- With careful thought, planning, and commitment, teachers and administrators can find alternative ways of conducting the business of school that smooth out uneven power dynamics created and enshrined in the politics of the privileged and powerful.
- If you change the conversation, you change the culture and the outcomes.
- **Looking Ahead:** Having established that privilege, power, and politics are potent influences upon how schools organize themselves, what they value, and how they operate, the next chapter will begin the conversation about why it is important to push back and resist, as well as how allies can prepare themselves to do so.