Teaching Assistants’ Perceptions of Power

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Introduction

During May 2006 a group of Teaching Assistants were asked a series of questions about their opinions of morality, power and leadership to inform a conference on this topic funded by the three bodies involved in educational leadership (BELMAS, BERA and SCRELM). This paper investigates how Teaching Assistants perceive the location of power within their schools. It also explores Teaching Assistants’ perception of the extent of their power within schools. Teaching Assistants tended to treat power and leadership as synonymous and gave little attention to morality in their responses.

We begin by examining the way that power may be defined in relation to Teaching Assistants’ work in schools. We then outline the methods used to gather data and highlight some of the key issues this research poses for the research community.

Defining Power

The Oxford English Dictionary\textsuperscript{1} provides a number of definitions of which the following appear to have some relevance to schools.

\textit{Power} (noun)
1. the ability to do something or act in a particular way.
2. the capacity to influence other people or the course of events.
3. a right or authority given or delegated to a person or body.

This definition does not explain how people gain power or understand the interpersonal relationships that underpin it. Neither does it move us towards understanding how power is perceived within schools.

Theories of Power

There are multiple theories of power, distinguished from one another by the chosen attribute or characteristic of power deemed to be the most important. (Pfeffer 1992) theorised that power was a property that can be ‘held by

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individuals, groups or organisations. Power can be an embedded property of structures, it can be a property of individuals or it can be the property of relationships.

*Power as a property of structures within an organisation*

Pfeffer (1992) has argued that power should be seen as a property of an individual’s role within an organisation. He identifies nine sources of this structural power which we divide into control points and community points. Control points identify ways in which a role in an organisation provides opportunities to control its activity. Community points identify ways in which an individual’s relationships with others in the community creates a platform for the exercise of power.

*Control points*

- Formal position and authority in the organisation structure
- Position in the organisation’s communication network
- Access to and control over information and other resources
- The centrality of own position to the organisation – The extent to which all other positions in the organisation relate to your position
- Authorised role in resolving critical problems and in reducing uncertainty
- Opportunity to cultivate allies and supporters

*Community points*

- The pervasiveness of one’s activities in the organisation
- Being irreplaceable
- Degree of unity within your section (lack of internal dissent)


This perspective is helpful for understanding power in schools. The power of a headteacher is a function of the role that headteachers are generally expected to play within the organisation of a school. Variation in the power of headteachers in different schools reflects variation in the roles undertaken by headteachers within the organisational structure of their schools. According to this perspective power is distributed when a headteacher devolves aspects of any of the control points. For example, the appointment of a Bursar changes the headteacher’s power by devolving access to information about the budget. Power is also distributed when a headteacher becomes less central to the organisational community.

*Power as a property of individuals within an organisation*
Pfeffer (1992) has also suggested that power can be a property of individuals’ attributes:

- Energy, endurance and physical stamina
- Ability to focus energy and avoid wasteful effort
- Sensitivity and ability to read and understand others
- Flexibility in selecting varied means to achieve goals
- Personal toughness; willingness to engage in conflict and confrontation
- Ability to ‘play the subordinate’ and ‘team member’ to enlist the support of others


This conceptualisation suggests that power is not necessarily associated with hierarchical positions or roles within the school.

*Power as a property of relationships within an organisation*

French and Raven’s (1958) typology of power in organisations combines structure and personal attributes. Their ‘relational’ view proposed five bases of power.

- **Legitimate Power** - refers to power of an individual because of the relative position and duties of the holder of the position within an organization. Legitimate Power is formal authority delegated to the holder of the position.

- **Reward Power** - depends upon the ability of the power wielder to confer valued material rewards.

- **Coercive Power** – depends upon the ability to apply negative influences onto others.

- **Expert Power** - an individual's power deriving from the skills or expertise of the person and the organization's needs for those skills and expertise. This type of power is specific and limited to the particular area in which the expert is trained and qualified.

- **Referent Power** - refers to the power or ability of individuals to persuade and influence others. It's based on the charisma and interpersonal skills of the power holder.

The first three categories might be regarded as ‘structural’ in Pfeffer’s terms. However, an advantage of French and Raven’s typology is that it encourages us to consider the ways in which these control points are exercised. From this perspective the extent to which each point of control leads to power depends on the skill with which control is exercised. The fourth and fifth categories
emphasise personal attributes, but they recognise that the power generated by those attributes depends on the relationships between the individual and the community. There is a second, important difference between Pfeffer's typology and the categories suggested by French and Raven. Whereas the sources of power in Pfeffer's typology are presented as cumulative, the categories of power in French and Raven's typology may be mutually exclusive. For example if you use coercive power you reduce opportunities to use referent power.

Summary

The authors of this study have defined "power" as the ability (real or perceived) or potential to bring about significant change, usually in people's lives, through the actions of oneself or of others. Power is;

"The capacity of individuals to overcome resistance on the part of others, to exert their will and to produce results consistent with their interest and objectives"
(Buchanan and Hucynski 2004 p828)

Power operates both relationally and reciprocally. To control others, one must have control over things that they desire or need. However, there is also a measure of reverse control. For example, The Headteacher and Governors have considerable power over Teaching Assistants because they control the number of hours worked, salary etc; However, the Teaching Assistant holds some reciprocal power: they may resign, alter their productivity, have time off, join a union etc; As such there is a shifting balance of power between parties in a given relationship.

To examine the nature of power in a relationship we need to analyse and identify the relative strengths of each party. There may be an equal or unequal balance of power and the balance itself may be stable or subject to change. In order to understand power it is important to analyse other relationships between the parties in a power relationship. For example; A Headteacher may have power over a Teaching Assistant as an employer. This may impact upon the Teaching Assistant's opinion of the power exerted by that person. Were they to meet in a relationship that was not based upon employment the Teaching Assistant might not describe the Headteacher as a powerful person. Power' closely resembles "influence", however we can make a distinction between influence as a more general concept, and power as intended influence.

Pfeffer's (1992) theory that power is a property of relationships within an organisation seems to us to be the most helpful for understanding power in schools. Variation in the location of power within a school can be seen as a reflection of the variation in interrelationships within the school. However, we intend to use utilise all of the theories as vantage points from which to review the operation of power in relation to the work of Teaching Assistants.
A key question to be asked at this point concerns our chosen definition of power. If there are competing conceptual definitions of power and we have chosen a definition based upon a relational and reciprocal understanding of the power relationship, how do we know that this is the conceptualisation of power the Teaching Assistants in our study also use? It may be that their response to the questions is coloured by their chosen conceptualisation. For example; if a respondent perceives power as structural (Pfeffer 1992), they are less likely to perceive that they can effect change in an organisation and therefore have a perception of Teaching Assistants as powerless. If, on the other hand, a respondent conceptualises power as a property of individuals and works within an organisation that values individuals they are more likely to perceive that Teaching Assistants have power. The authors believe that we can assume that the Teaching Assistants have an understanding of power as relational obtained through their study of the Foundation Degree (FD). We can be reasonably confident that their understanding of the definition of power accords with that used in the study.

**Method**

Teaching Assistants were invited to the conference to share their views on morality, power and leadership. Open invitations to the conference failed to generate any response which was unexpected given that these Teaching Assistants were not known for their reticence and take part in professional development conferences hosted by the Local Authority. After some discussion with the Teaching Assistants it emerged that there were some key factors that had prevented their engagement;

- The Teaching Assistants were unable to take time off during the day – they were not allowed to go because their work was too important
- It was made clear to some Teaching Assistants that attendance was “not allowed” because of the cost to the school in replacing the TA with supply cover
- The Teaching Assistants would not get paid if they were not at school working
- Teaching Assistants lacked the confidence to attend the conference – “I’m not clever enough” – A Variant on this was that the researchers and the Local Authority were “important” whilst Teaching Assistants were not

As a result of the inability of TAs to contribute directly to the conference the authors decided to seek the views of one group of 15 students from the FD programme. The students completed a questionnaire which was used to inform the presentation at the conference.

This raises some key issues that the research community must tackle namely how do we empower the wider school workforce to take part in research when those with power prevent their engagement? This means taking account of the economic realities of those working in the wider school workforce, many of whom are on temporary term time only contracts. The other point that the authors wish to be considered is the extent to which we have invisible power
systems within the research community that reinforce the barriers between practitioners in the wider school workforce and researchers. It was interesting to note that the presentation order for the conference began with researchers’ viewpoints on power, moved to the Local Authority view of power and ended with the Teaching Assistants point of view. This was a deliberate act by the organiser to emphasize the hierarchical system within which we operate. The authors deliberately did not present the views of the Teaching Assistants. Instead they simply collated the findings on a Powerpoint Presentation which they then allowed to run silently for 10 minutes. The conference gained a very visual reminder of the absence of this group.

To further our understanding of the Teaching Assistants’ views on power, morality and leadership the authors revised the original questionnaire and reissued it. The findings presented in this paper represent the views of this group only. The group comprised 30 Teaching Assistants. All of the Teaching Assistants are currently students on a BA (Hons) Education. They have completed an appropriate Foundation Degree in Teaching Assistants/Learning Support and are 30 credits into the final phase of the Honours level part of their course. From the 30 respondents, 28 are female and 2 are male. All students are between 21 and 60. Questionnaires were given out at the end of a teaching session and students completed them before they left. The questionnaire did not request information which could identify the student or their place of work, guaranteeing confidentiality. Due to the nature of the questionnaire and small numbers, data was interpreted using Excel and Word.

**Findings & Discussion**

The data gathered identified that all of the Teaching Assistants work either in the primary or secondary sector. It also shows that all have been working in schools for over 3 years, with 26 of the 30 being in schools for more than 5 years. The majority are employed on a full time basis (24 of the 30) with the remaining 6 employed on a part time basis.

**Personal Identity and Power**

We began by asking teaching assistants questions relating to their feelings about their own identity and power.
The graph above shows a mixed opinion on TA personal identification of power. The median grade of 5 shows the majority of TAs identified they had at least some elements of power within their organisation, although the graph shows 13 TAs indicated below the median, whereas only 7 above. Teaching Assistants locate themselves in the lower half of the range indicating that they perceive that they have little power compared to the most powerful person in school.

When questioned about how they are prevented from enhancing this power two strong themes reoccurred: the TA role; and their present qualifications.

A TA revealed that;

“As a teaching assistant I am told what my role is and what to do for each day. My role can change several times throughout the day and my role is to follow orders and instructions”

(TA 1)

The notion of the TA role not holding a power weighting indicates that these TAs do not identify their role and position within the school to be deemed worthy of power. Five responses indicated that because the TA role held no senior leadership team duties and had little impact upon the day to day running of the school, the TA was relatively powerless.

“My role in school means I am not part of any management team. I have to follow instructions given by SENCO and Senior Management.”

(TA 5)

Similar thoughts were given when lack of qualifications was provided as the reason for the personal lack of power; however unlike the answers relating to the role itself, these responses indicated that once qualifications were gained then the power of the individual would increase.
“The role and responsibilities that I undertake at present limit the training within school that I can access. I have found myself held back until I have my BA” (TA 11)

However; 7 TAs indicated that they were not prevented at all and that their power status was their choice.

“I don’t feel that I am prevented from becoming more powerful, as school is very supportive and committed to staff development” (TA 20)

**Decision Making; implementing vision and power**

![Graph: Who is the most powerful person in your organisation?]

**Fig: 2 The most powerful person in the organisation**

Most of the Teaching Assistants (23 of the 30) identified the headteacher as the most powerful person within the organisation. Responses to the question included those who correlated power with the position with the authority to implement policy;

“Head - She has authority to make changes. She has trust and backing of the government today to this. She is convincing orator – coming across as making decisions based on knowledge with an overriding concern for the children” (TA 1)

Some Teaching Assistants correlated power with the ability to command respect.

“Head – Hold the respect of the majority of those in contact with HT. Trustworthy, appears to strive to provide the best for all pupils” (TA 4)

Others correlated power with vision;
“Head – He has inspired to transform. He is powerful because he is motivational, has a strong vision, he is strong minded and able to mediate and translate between the government directives his fellow worker and his vision for the school and the children in it”
(TA 20)

One Teaching Assistant suggested the deputy

“Deputy – Deputy Head is more in touch with staff, has a better insight and roll in day to day running and decision making within the school”
(TA 15)

Whilst two offered: the pupils;

“Pupils – Without the pupils there would be no organisation”
(TA 19)

One identified the whole staff;

“All staff in the school community – they all make a positive community”
(TA 2)

A large number identified power as resting with Governors;

“Governors - Because they have statutory powers over decisions made concerning the school”
(TA 17)

We acknowledge the limitations of the questionnaire data here and certainly would want to investigate this further, clarifying the responses given. For example; is it power which allows the head to make decisions, or is it due to the role requiring decisions to be made which relays the power to the headteacher? It could be that TAs view the role of the headteacher conferring power as they identify that their own role is what limits their power.

**Power and Morality**

TAs gave clear indication of the dangers of those in schools with too much power where ‘Power hunger’ and poor decision making proved to be the common issues.

“May lose sight of the reasons for position – to uphold the standards and deliver the curriculum appropriate at the time. Personal ambition may be a problem”
(TA 19)

The school’s governing body was identified as being the body which could ensure those in power acted in a moral way.
“The governing body ensure that the school is doing everything in a moral way, this includes the headteacher”
(TA 28)

Similarly in a faith school the diocese featured as a body to ensure moral decisions.

Bureaucratic processes were seen as key mechanisms for ensuring that power was controlled;

“Meetings, curriculum, guidelines, inspections”
(TA 3)

Only 4 responses identified personal integrity as responsible for power being exercised responsibly.

Conclusion

Personal Identity and Power

TA’s have a working conception of power as property (Pfeffer 1992) embedded in the structure of the school and therefore closely associated with the role of the headteacher. This is mirrored in their personal responses which indicate that they don’t perceive themselves to have power because of the lack of status associated with the role of the TA.

They also have a working conceptualisation of power as a property of relationships. Many identified their lack of qualifications as a reason why they did not have power. It may be that TA’s are identifying the interrelationship between qualifications, position and power within the structure. For example; becoming a teacher confers status which is reflected in greater salary levels than those received by a TA. It could be argued that teachers have ‘expert power’ (French & Raven 1958). Access to initial teacher training and being deemed an ‘expert’ is determined by having a qualification at degree level and therefore there is a link between qualifications and power.

Another interesting thing about this data is how many TAs thought they had some power and the contrast between these and those TAs who didn’t think they had power. A further area of research may be to identify the differences between these groups, for example does experience (length of time in post) affect a TAs perception of their personal power?

Power and Decision Making

TA’s identified the headteacher as the most powerful person in school. They have a working conceptualisation of the source of the Headteachers power that closely allies with French and Raven’s (1958) concept of legitimate power where the headteacher is seen as having power as a direct result of the position. However, some TA’s see the Headteacher’s power quite differently as a form of referent power i.e.; being linked to the charisma and personality of the person.
Morality and Power

The working conceptualisation of power as a property is also prevalent in the TAs’ understandings of ways in which they can be assured that those with power are acting morally. Many identified that the bureaucratic mechanisms within the structure were capable of ensuring that power was not abused. However they do not consider the nature of the mechanisms themselves and any potential inherent bias.

This research raised some key questions about how the research community can capture the valuable insights that Teaching Assistants’, who are now educated to a high level, can bring to our understanding of education. This means finding practical solutions that subvert the power systems conspiring against Teaching Assistants’ involvement in research such as pay and terms & conditions of employment.

Future research in this area needs to explore the relationship between perceptions of power and an individual’s position in an organisation. Is there a link between organisational structure and conceptualisations of power? e.g.’ Do schools with more distributed leadership structures produce Teaching Assistants with a more optimistic view on the location of power and of their own power?

The authors believe that this research has identified a key problem that school leaders will need to address. Teaching Assistants have access to Degree and may go on to Masters level qualifications. If they think that power is linked to qualification it would be reasonable for many to assume that they will have increased power and status in their workplace. This may not be the case. The challenge for school leaders will be to manage these aspirations.

References


Endnotes

2 Some Teaching Assistants now hold PPA cover supervision responsibilities. To attend the conference would have meant supply cover being purchased
3 Staffordshire University is currently in the process of revalidating its’ M Level Education Provision top ensure a progression route for Teaching Assistants beyond Degree level

This document was added to the Education-line database on 6 February 2009