
A study of the bases of power in further education

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Abstract:

All leaders, including teachers and managers in vocational education and training, are seen to possess and to use power, even if subtly. Power, however, is a variable in that complex mix of variables that come together to underpin effective leadership for which at least in Further education, there is a dearth of published research available. This study aimed to add a contribution to the research outcomes in this area by examining the perception of power by Further education teachers in two different cultural contexts. Vocational teachers in both Australia and in China were asked to rate the bases of power used by their direct superior or manager. Both within-group and between-group analyses were carried out on the resulting data. These indicated that the bases of power were ranked differently by the two national samples. There was also an attempt to find the 'best' predictor of referent power, a source of power said to underpin the transformational leadership concept of charisma.

Introduction

Effective leadership is currently seen to be an important variable in the complex equation of human factors and behaviours, which leads to knowledge and skill acquisition and the achievement of organisational learning (Pithers, 1998). This is certainly the case in the area of Higher and Further education as well as training and Human Resource Development (HRD). Leadership is essentially the ability of a person to influence others towards the achievement of organisational goals (Robbins, 2003, p. 314). Over many years, however, there has been recognition that the concept of 'power' is closely inter related with that of leadership. "To exercise influence a leader must have power" as DuBrin (2001, p. 178) has put it. It has been pointed out that power differs from leadership in that it does not require goal compatibility, only a dependent relationship between a leader and the subordinated nor does it require any goal congruence between these two entities (Robbins, 2003, p. 366).

Power is closely intertwined with leadership and has been defined simply as the ability to mobilise resources and get things done (Kanter, 1979, p.66). For other workers in the field, power has been defined as the ability to influence the behaviour, attitudes, beliefs, emotions and values of subordinates (French & Raven, 1959). In practice, Kipnis and Schmidt (1988) found that favourable and improved performance ratings were strongly affected by a manager's use of power.

In the area of Higher and Further education and more specifically, the area of vocational education and training, the use of power to influence others is seen to be a 'dirty' word; one with negative connotations. Leadership is the positive flip side. Nevertheless, as most workers in the field have pointed out, the two concepts are quite intertwined (DuBrin, 2004). The perceived negativity associated with the concept of power in vocational education and training or in fact, in education more generally, has probably come about because thinking and pedagogy, especially in the in the area of Further education has over many preceding decades, been strongly influenced by

adult education theory. For example, Knowles (1990) outlined the 'principles of teaching adults', which included teaching and learning styles based on collaborative learning, self-direction and the development of autonomy. The Humanistic approach to education so predominant in the 1970s also affected educational leadership thinking. This was an approach that stressed leadership styles that directed teachers to the needs and personal freedom of the individual. It was based on teachers' leadership styles that expected teachers to work with their students to facilitate (rather than 'direct') learning via a warm friendly, emotionally rich climate in which a student's self esteem and confidence as well as their learning would flourish (eg. Holt, 1976; Rogers, 1969). All of this led at least in part, to the recent emphasis in leadership on sharing power, involving participation, delegation and empowerment.

Nevertheless, what is clear is that power is exercised (even if subtly) by teachers in all educational workplaces. Power is used by vocational education teachers whilst teaching in their classrooms. It is used in staffrooms, during work-based discussion and of course by managers and Head teachers in their daily work. Power is and remains a very pervasive method of influence in all educational workplaces, even if it mostly lurks beneath the surface. This is because it is all about one's influence and how to make it impact on others to achieve some outcome or goal. The problem, however, is that there is so little in the published literature about the concept in practice. The aim of the present study was therefore; to add some further evidence to what sparse information already exists about power in Further education.

Indeed, one particular focus of study about power in the more general organisational management area has been concerned with its derivation. In this area of research, workers (eg. Hunt, 1986; Morgan, 1986) have shown that organisational power can be derived from many different sources, although one of the most enduring theoretical positions on the bases of power was that proposed by French and Raven (1959). Much research since the postulation of their basic power taxonomy has tended to add support for its basic tenants. These workers argued, based on their research, that there were five power bases used by managers of all types in all contexts.

The first of these bases of power was termed Coercive power. It is a base dependent on fear. It is based on the belief that the manager has the power to apply some negative consequences for a subordinate's compliance failure. One example would be a vocational teacher's ability to award a 'fail' grade or an unsatisfactory evaluation to a student. Another would be a sanction, applied by a Principal or a Head teacher to a teacher who disregarded College rules or standards. In this sense, the student or teacher complies with the teacher or their manager's wishes, respectively, because they are influenced by what could happen to them if they did not comply.

A second power base is called Reward power. In this case students or teachers are influenced by and may comply with managers' wishes, because they perceive positive benefits may flow to them if they do comply. For the student, this may be a higher grade, whilst for the teacher perhaps, some extra resources granted to them or to their department or unit to share.

Legitimate power is another important power base. It is based on a teacher's or a manager's legitimate right to take a decision and expect that it will be carried out. It's

about the perception of power or influence resulting from their formal position or designation (eg. as teacher, head teacher, principal or manager) in the organization.

Expert power is another potential source of power. It is focussed on a person's source of influence based on their knowledge, skills and expertise in a relevant work-based area. For most teachers this is an important power base, because their students may be easily influenced by their expert, subject-matter content knowledge, experience and skill. It might be expected also to influence subordinates, who had say, less working experience than a senior colleague.

French and Raven (1959) identified one other primary base of power, which was termed Referent power. The source of influence here comes from a person's personal traits and resources. It could be for example, the desire of a teacher's students or of a manager's subordinates to be associated or identified with that person as a leader. It is really about liking another person and wanting to be associated with them. As Robbin's (2002) has pointed out this power concept is very close to the important leadership concept of 'charisma'.

The French and Raven (1959) categorisation of power since its inception, has served as the basis of much research on the sources and bases of power in organisational leadership and management. For instance, one study by Atwater and Yammarino (1996) found that leadership behaviour and power were closely interrelated. They also found that both a leader's referent and expert power (but not coercive power) were related to transformational leadership; DuBrin (2004, p. 199) noted that this is about showing knowledge, charisma, inspiration and consideration for others.

Nevertheless, another major issue in the research on leadership and power has come from the published studies on variation among leaders from different cultures. It cannot be readily assumed, for example, that teachers or other managers from other cultures would use power in ways similar to Australians, British or North Americans. Indeed, Hofstede (1980, 1993, p. 91) originally surveyed over 116,000 IBM employees in 40 countries about their work-related values. He found that managers and their subordinates appeared to vary on five value dimensions of national culture. The one, however, that most links to the present research was termed Power-Distance. This is the degree to which people in a national culture accept that organisational power is distributed unequally; it is seen to vary from 'low' (relatively equal) to 'high' (relatively unequal). Furthermore, the research indicated that in some Western democratic cultures such as the United States of America (USA) and Australia, Power-distance was, on average 'low', whilst in some other countries such as China, it was 'high'. A somewhat related concept in Hofstede's category system termed Individualism, was found to be 'high' in places like the USA, Australia and Britain but 'low' in China.

Hofstede (1993) has argued, therefore, that there are cultural influences and constraints in managerial leadership or influence theories that are applied when trying to understand the behaviour of people with different work values from different cultures. More will be said about the possible implications of Hofstede's theory later but it is worthy of note here, because in the present study, two groups of subjects were examined from different national cultures.

The purpose of the present study was to examine and compare the bases of power used by a group of Australian Higher education teachers and managers and a similar group of Chinese subjects in their home countries. Each of these national samples completed a Managers' Power scale, adapted from Hinkin and Schriesheim (1989) and based on French and Raven's (1959) power taxonomy. The obtained data were analysed and any observed differences both within group (i.e. How would each of the national groups rank their perceived power bases) and between group (i.e. cross-cultural comparisons) were examined. Based on a dearth of prior research evidence it was difficult to make prior predictions, especially about likely between-group differences. It was expected, however, that there would be significant differences between the perceived power bases for the national samples. It was predicted that forms of Legitimate power might be considered more important by the Chinese, whilst for the Australian sample, perhaps, Expert and Referent power would be ranked higher than other power bases. An attempt was also made to examine for each national group the best predictor of Referent power, considered as mentioned earlier, to underpin the leadership concept of 'charisma', a variable often seen to be linked to effective transformational leadership.

Method

Samples and subjects.

The national groups chosen were both samples of convenience. The total sample was composed of 40 individuals. The Chinese group surveyed totalled 15 individuals and they completed the survey, whilst at a Higher education college in Central China. They were all teachers and managers at a Chinese 'Normal' university, which is one that specialises in post-school vocational type courses. Some of these individuals held management positions such as Head teacher or Head of Department. The Australian sample of 25 individuals, consisted of vocational teachers in the area of technical and further education, some of whom also held junior management positions. Both groups were engaged in degree studies at the time of their involvement in this study. The age range approximated 20s-early 50s years and there was a relatively equal gender balance in both groups.

Research instrument.

Both national groups of teachers completed the Hinkin and Schriesheim (1989) adaption of the original French and Raven scale (as modified slightly by DuBrin, 2004, pp. 196-197). Each person had to rate their supervisor or manager in their current Further education workplace. The scale was useful, especially in the Chinese context, because it was relatively short, and straight forward to complete. It consisted of 20 statements in total, each one linked to a 5-point Lickert scale. There were 4 statements relevant to each of the five bases of power, with each of which the respondent had to 'agree' or 'disagree'.

Procedure.

The survey instrument was given out and its purpose explained to each group (with the aid of direct English translation in China). Potential respondents were given a choice of participation or not in the study. No individual declined to participate. Each group completed the survey in one sitting. A total score was obtained as well as a mean score for each of the power categories for each person in both of the national groups. The survey had the advantage of quick simplicity to fill in as well as ease in interpretation. To make sure that the Chinese respondents accurately understood each

statement and the scale coding a translator read in Cantonese each of these in turn and then the scoring key. The completed survey forms were then collected and examined by the author. A similar procedure occurred (but without a translator) for the Australian respondents.

Results.

Table 1 shows separately for each of the five French and Raven power bases the mean scores and standard deviations (in brackets) as well as the overall mean for each national group.

Table 1: Mean score and standard deviation (in brackets) for each power base for both national groups.

Group	Base of Power					Overall
	Reward	Coercive	Legit.	Expert	Referent	
Australian	2.9(1.1)	3.7(1.1)	4.0(.7)	3.3(1.1)	3.8(1.2)	70.6(10.4)
Chinese	3.5(.7)	4.0(1.9)	3.3(1.5)	2.7(1.4)	3.1(1.4)	62.3(17.9).

Table 1 shows the total mean scores of 70.6 (Australian sample) and 62.3 (Chinese sample). This between-group difference was not significant ($F= 3.4, p>.05$), when the data was analysed using an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test. Both of these overall mean scores were categorised as 'low' power, according to normative data provided by the instrument's authors. The analysis of the data was now more concerned with the rank order of the power bases for each national group, rather than any statistical differences.

It was clear that the within-group Australian respondents perceived some bases of power to be likely to be used more frequently than others. In decreasing rank order these were: Legitimate, Referent, Coercive, Expert and Reward power. In comparison, for the Chinese group these were (also in decreasing rank order): Coercive, Reward, Legitimate, Referent and Expert power.

Furthermore, a Stepwise regression was undertaken separately for both of the national samples to find the best predictor of Referent power. Stepwise regression is often used to find the most efficient regression equation with the smallest number of variables; it enables a prediction to be made about which independent variable or variables (all power scores, except Referent) predict as much of the dependent variable (in this case, the Referent score) variance as possible.

For the Australian group, the regression analysis showed that the best single predictor of Referent power was Expert power ($R= .61, R\text{-squared}= .37; F= 13.5, p<.05$). This meant that for this national sample, Expert power was the best predictor of Referent power (37% of its variance could be predicted). A different result was found for the Chinese national group. Here the best predictor of Referent power was Legitimate power ($R= .63, R\text{-squared}= .40; F= 8.7, p<.05$). This meant that for this group, Legitimate power was the single best predictor of Referent power (40% of its variance could be predicted by the independent variable).

Discussion.

Taken as a whole, the Australian and Chinese vocational education power results were similar. For instance, there was no significant difference between the total mean scores for the Australian and the Chinese samples. Both of these groups scored in the 'Low' designated range, according to the limited norms supplied with the instrument. This was to be expected given both groups were working in Further education, which is an area considered by most workers in the field not likely to be a 'high' power occupation. Government and semi-government instrumentalities usually provide further and vocational education and so these are workplaces where managers as leaders are highly regulated and usually do not have strong power bases in the Reward and Coercive areas. That is less likely to be the case in many other privately run organisations. Secondly, in Further education there are mostly people-oriented occupations in which power needs to be (or seen to be) used in more discreet and delicate ways.

When the actual five bases of power were examined for each group, however, in terms of their rated 'importance' and then these within-group rankings were compared between the national groups some differences became apparent. For the Chinese national sample, Coercive, Legitimate and Reward power (all sources of 'position' power) were rated higher than Referent and Expert power. The Australian sample, on the other hand, rated their 'top two' as Legitimate and Referent power (a source of 'personal' power); they rated Referent and Expert power last of all as power bases that were likely to be applied by their managers. One issue of interest here is that Expert power was ranked in a lowly position by both national groups, when it might be thought that for any manager or supervisor, working in a people-rich education profession, this would be perceived to be a 'key' personal base of power.

Coercive and Reward power were ranked highly for the Chinese sample but not so strongly for the Australian sample of educators. The Chinese, working in Central China, did appear to be strongly influenced by these bases of power. They were working in a strongly bureaucratic system, influenced by those with legitimate power in that system, which included not just academic managers but also local institutional Party officials. Their educational system and culture also appeared to put more emphasis on a manager's careful but applied use of paternal approach to influence; one where (more personal) Reward and Coercive power bases might be seen to be applied and of importance for influence. For the Australian sample this role appeared more likely to be played by Legitimate power, which is based simply on a manager's designated position and title.

Nevertheless, the main point to emerge from this analysis is that it should not be assumed that vocational educators and leaders in Further and vocational education and training from different cultures, operate using the same bases of power. There were overall between-group similarities as the present results have shown but also apparent differences. This was a point made earlier by Hofstede (1980, 1993), who indicated that it could not be assumed that managers from different cultures would use power in similar ways. The data reported here tend to support Hofstede's hypothesis. As was outlined earlier he postulated that one reason for these differences was the notion of Power-Distance that is the degree to which people in different cultures accept that power is distributed unequally. Hofstede's research indicated that this was 'low' in places like Australia but 'high' in places like China. The opposite appeared to be true

of another of his related concepts- individualism. Perhaps, this finding may be related to the somewhat paternal leadership style adopted and indeed expected in Chinese further education and evidenced as well, by the between-group rankings found in the present study. Findings such as these may also be of some value in considering the way power is used by say Australian teachers when dealing with Chinese students, who have different expectations, because they come from a learning culture where different bases of power have been applied.

One further finding worthy of note in the present study, concerned an analysis of the 'best' single predictor of Referent power for both national groups. The results showed that for the Australian sample, the best single predictor of Referent power was Expert power, whilst for the Chinese sample it was Legitimate power. It should be recalled that some workers in the field have argued that Referent power is seen to underpin (at least in part) to the leadership concept of charisma. There is thus tentative evidence from the results of this study, that suggest that the power base underlying 'charisma' may be more strongly linked to a position source, that is stemming from the organisation (i.e. Legitimate power) for the Chinese national group. For the Australian sample, however, the best single predictor was a personal power source or one stemming from the individual (i.e. Referent power). Results like this one suggest that once again, it is not a good idea to think that the operation and influence of charisma in leadership is linked to the same power base in different cultural groups. Of course, the quest for effective influence using power causes the leader to engage in organisational politics. Political behaviour can also be played by successful leaders to achieve power. Nevertheless, outcome involving different cultural groups using that important influence variable awaits future research.

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Australian Vocational Education Review
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The *Australian Vocational Education Review* is the journal of **the Centre for Learning Research**, Faculty of Education, Griffith University, Nathan 4111, Australia. The Review is published twice a year in May and November.

Annual subscription rates for the Review is \$66
Individual back copies are available for \$33 each

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Please note: views expressed in contributions to the Australian Vocational Education Review are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Centre for Learning Research.

The Centre acknowledges the support given to the preparation and publication of this journal by the Faculty of Education, Griffith University.

ISSN - 1321-3954



australian
vocational
education
review

Vol 12
No 2
2005

CENTRE FOR LEARNING RESEARCH