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Power in Rock Point School District:

A Study Based on Elite Theory

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### Abstract

This qualitative research study, which seeks to identify those holding power in a small town school district, rests on elite theory, the theoretical framework advanced by Hunter and Kimbrough. Using the reputational method, 19 people in the larger school district community were interviewed regarding their perceptions of power players in this district of about 1,200 students. Respondents perceive 57 people as having some power, but only 18 have significant power. Discussion follows regarding both formal and informal power structures. Those holding formal power do so because of their professional positions. Those holding informal power are business leaders or related to them and have been in the community for a generation or more.

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How does one determine the nature and scope of power in any community? This question has intrigued people for various reasons from the beginning of civilization. Many theories exist as to how to best answer this question. One could use any of these approaches including a social class theory approach (Warner, 1949), a pluralistic approach (Dahl, 1961), or an elite theory approach (Hunter, 1953; Kimbrough, 1964).

Small town school districts are unique communities consisting of students, parents, support staff, teachers, administrators, members of the broader community, and school board members. The entire town is involved to some degree in its school district. For example, all pay property taxes either directly or indirectly to support the schools. Through use of the reputational method of elite theory, this study seeks to answer the following research question: What power structures exist in one small town school district? In this study, the term “power” refers to the ability to make others conform to one’s own agenda or the agenda of a power group. For example, a superintendent may exercise power by inserting a particular curriculum into the school district. Whether this power is exercised unilaterally or through committees makes no difference. If the superintendent has power, he or she will get the job done.

In order to answer the research question, the purpose of this study is to determine the power structure of Rock Point, a small town school district, using elite theory, and to provide a baseline of comparison for analyses of future studies. For example, the researcher intends to do a study of the principal’s role in sex and HIV/AIDS education in the same school district. Understanding the power structure of Rock Point will provide valuable insight into that study. Additionally, future studies could compare and contrast the results of differing theories of

studying power. For example, future research could be conducted to answer the same research question using methods of pluralistic theory, positional power theories, or others. It would be fascinating to compare and contrast the results to gain a deeper insight into the various theories.

### Theoretical Framework

This study was conducted within the framework of elite theory. Floyd Hunter (1953) advanced this theory in his classical work *Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers*. Elite theory assumes that power rests in the hands of a community's elite members. Historically, for example, health care professionals, administrators, and various political groups like the American Social Hygiene Association and Planned Parenthood of America used their elite power to advance the sex education movement, often despite intense local opposition (Breasted, 1970; Hottois & Milner, 1975; Moran, 2000). Within any community, certain people become members of the policy-making elite through wealth, position, charisma, control of resources, or other factors. Hunter employed the reputational method in researching the power structures in Poplar Village as a pilot for his larger study of Regional City. His methods produced remarkable results and influenced Ralph Kimbrough in his studies of power as related to education. In *Political Power and Educational Decision-Making*, Kimbrough (1964) studied the larger effects of political power on education, but he did not conduct an in-depth study of any small town school district. Moreover, school districts are organized somewhat differently in the Pacific Northwest, where this study was conducted, than they are in Florida where Kimbrough completed much of his work. This study will use modifications of the reputational method of elite theory employed by Hunter and Kimbrough to study a particular small town school district.

## Research Methods and Design

Consistent with the purpose of this study, the researcher employs the reputational method of qualitative research (Hunter, 1953). In general, this method involves interviewing people to determine their perceptions of who holds power in the school district. Specific elements of this method are detailed below.

### *Overall Design Type and Specific Design*

Overall, this research uses qualitative methods. Participants were interviewed to determine their perceptions of who holds power in their school district. Specifically, the reputational method of Hunter (1953) serves as the model for this research design.

### *Site Selection*

Site selection involved the consideration of several factors. First, the site had to be a “full service district.” This meant that the site must house separate buildings for elementary, middle, and high school. This factor was important because such a site would represent a typical school district even though it might be small. Second, the site had to be conveniently located for the researcher. Given time constraints for completing the project within several months, convenient location was essential. Third, in keeping with the focus of the study, the district had to be located within an incorporated “small town” defined as having a population between 2000 and 5000. Rock Point School District met all of these criteria. It is a small town full service school district of approximately 1,200 students. Rock Point has four school buildings: one K-5 elementary, one 6-8 middle school, one 9-12 high school, and one alternative school. The district also has a bus garage in which interviews were also conducted.

### *Selection of Informants*

Informants had to be adults for several important reasons. First, adults have a greater understanding of power in terms of decision-making in a school district than children do. Second, time restraints precluded the contact time required to obtain parental permission to interview minors for this study. And finally, children are transient in a school district in a way adults are not.

The specific selection of informants began with the district superintendent who provided permission to conduct interviews in the various district buildings, a written roster of all staff in the school district, and his perception of the power players in the school district. The remaining informants were selected completely at random in each of the buildings in the district. Informants were either interviewed on the spot, in private rooms provided by the building leaders, or asked for an appointment for an interview to be held at a mutually convenient time. This procedure netted 19 interviews over three days.

### *Data Collection Procedures*

The first informant was the superintendent. He was asked to name the people who held power in the school district. For all informants, it was clear that power leaders could be selected from both formal and informal categories including anyone in the community. As the superintendent provided names, they were written on 3 x 5 cards. He provided names of certified staff, classified staff, board members, parents, grandparents, and other community members.

After the first informant, the remaining 18 followed a bit different procedure. First, the purpose and nature of the study was explained, and they were asked if they would voluntarily participate in the study. Confidentiality was ensured, as was their right to stop their participation

at any time. All but two agreed to participate and completed the interview in full. The first step was that all 3 x 5 name cards previously collected were laid out on a table and the informant was asked to select any number of cards bearing names of people they did not consider to have power in the school district. Second, these cards were removed from sight and the informant was asked to add names that should have been included but were not. Each of the remaining 18 informants added names, but, as one would expect, the number of names added tended to be smaller with each successive informant. Third, the cards originally selected, and the cards added by the informant, were laid out on the table and the informant was asked to pick the top 10 power leaders in the district. Fourth, the informant was asked to rank order their top 10 names in terms of their perception of the degree of power each person had. Finally, some informants were asked to provide information about people on the list for purposes of analysis. After the informant was thanked and left the room, the choices for the top 10 list were recorded on the backs of the cards using a numerical code. Each informant's name was recorded and coded so that the data collected could be linked back to the person providing it.

### *Research Ethics*

As mentioned above, verbal informed consent was obtained from each informant. All but two agreed to participate. Those two had no problem with the study; they simply did not feel they had enough time to participate. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured for each participant and for the people they named as power leaders. Any names of people or places used in this report are pseudonyms. The study was approved through the Washington State University Institutional Review Board.

### *Analysis of Data*

The data consisted of 57 names provided by 19 informants along with the coding of how the power leader fit into the informant's top 10 list. For example, Karen Warner turned out to be the eighth most powerful person in the district according to this study. The card with her name has the following number pairs on the back: (1,4), (2,6), (3,7), (4,9), (5,3), (6,7), and (11,8). The first number represents the number assigned to the informant. The second number represents the position Karen held in that informant's top 10 list.

In order to analyze the data, the name of each person listed on a 3 x 5 card was entered onto an electronic spreadsheet along with numbers representing how informants placed them in their rank order listing. For example, the spreadsheet entry for Karen appeared as follows: Karen Warner, 7, 5, 4, 2, 8, 4, and 3. These numbers were calculated by taking 11 minus the second number in each ordered pair on the back of her card. For example, in Karen's case  $7 = 11 - 4$ ,  $5 = 11 - 6$ ,  $4 = 11 - 7$ , and so on for each of her ordered pairs. This calculation was made for ease of analysis because larger numbers, rather than the smaller rank order numbers, then represented the magnitude of a person's position on a given informant's top 10 list. With this conversion, Karen's "power score" could then be calculated as 33, the sum of all of the numbers on her spreadsheet entry. In this way, each power player received a power score so that a rank ordering of all 57 names could be determined using the "sort" function of the spreadsheet software program.

### Findings

As with former studies by Hunter and Kimbrough, which also followed the reputational method of elite theory, this study produced exciting results. They can be classified into two



major themes: *Power of Position* and *Informal Power*. Both themes are presented in detail below.

### *Power of Position*

The formal positions of power in a school district begin with the elected school board members and extend to the administrative team and, to some extent, the staff. Following a theoretical framework based upon power of position, then, one might expect the board chair to be the most powerful person in the district, followed by the vice-chair and the other board members, followed by the superintendent, followed by the principals and assistant principals, followed by staff leaders. Figure 1 shows this assumed power structure compared to the actual findings in Rock Point.

Of the five elected board members, only four were named as having power, and only one of these members made the district top 10. The vice-chair had the greatest power, ranking number two on the overall ranking of all 57 people. The board chair ranked number 12, and two other board members ranked number 14 and number 40. So, while one might expect to see the school board members right at the top, that certainly did not turn out to be the case in Rock Point. For ease of conceptualization, the board was assigned an arbitrary assumed power index of 100. The actual power index was 25.

After the superintendent, the administrative team in the Rock Point School District consists of three principals and an assistant principal who serves at the high school. Each administrator wears many hats because Rock Point is a small district. For example, various administrators share duties like principal of the alternative school and special education director. The administrative team members were all in the top 10 for the district as a whole and followed a predictable order. The superintendent ranked number one in the district, the high school

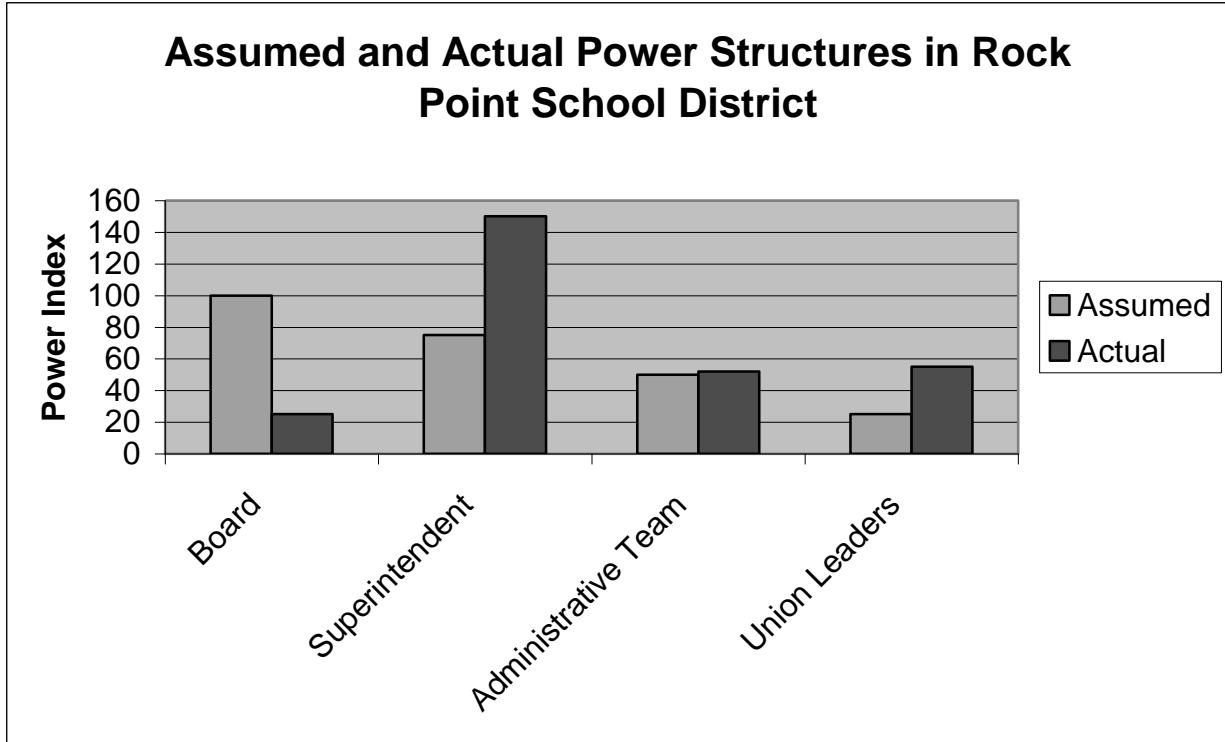


Figure 1. The board, superintendent, administrative team, and union leaders were arbitrarily assigned “assumed” power index scores of 100, 75, 50, and 25 respectively in order to model the expected “power of position.” The actual power scores computed in this study are given beside each assumed score. The superintendent scored 150, the union leaders 55, the administrative team 52, and the school board 25. Power index scores were computed by averaging the scores of the individuals in each group.

principal number four followed by his assistant principal at number five, the middle school principal at number six, and the elementary principal at number 10. The superintendent made a very strong showing in the analysis. Seventeen of 19 informants named the superintendent as a power player in the district. Perhaps predictably, he did not choose himself as a power player and only Dorothy Darling failed to list him on her top 10 list. It is telling to note that Dorothy is the daughter of the school board vice-chair and that, consistent with the overall ranking in this study, she ranked her parent as being the second most powerful person in the district. Of the 17 who listed the superintendent in the top 10, every one of them ranked him number one. The superintendent's "power score" of 150 dwarfed the entire list. The number two power score, held by the board vice-chair was 79. The administrative team as a whole had an actual power index score of 52, as seen in Figure 1. It is interesting to note that the administrators' relative power was perceived as being directly related to the grade levels of the building in which they served. It is also interesting to note that power of position rates high for the administrative team even though it does not for the school board.

Power of position also ranks high for union leaders. The certified staff has formed the Rock Point Education Association (RPEA), an affiliate of the state chapter of the National Education Association (NEA). The classified staff has also formed a separate collective bargaining organization, an affiliate of the Public School Employees (PSE). Richard Clark is president of the RPEA and Peter Close is president of the local PSE. Both made the top 10 list, Richard at number three and Peter at number seven. These staff leaders, taken together, rated three points higher than the administrative team and were second in power behind only the superintendent (see Figure 1). So, of the top 10 power players in the district, eight of them hold power associated with their position on the administrative team, the school board, or the union

leadership. Only one of 12 people holding a position in these three categories was not named as having power in Rock Point, but of these categories, the board members are seen as having the least power of position.

### *Informal Power*

Basing quick perceptions of power on a person's position seems understandable. The more out of the ordinary findings, then, are related to those individuals outside the formal power structure who also were perceived as having power in Rock Point. In order to make this list, the person named had to have been chosen as a power player by at least four people and have a power score above 10. While these selection criteria may seem arbitrary, they make sense in evaluating the list as a whole. Only 42 of the 57 power players named made at least one informant's top 10 list. Of these 42, only 17 were selected on four or more top 10 lists and only 24 had power scores above 10. The informal power leaders, in order of their perceived power are: Karen Warner, a school nurse serving the entire district and married to a town banker, James Irish, a major business owner with deep roots in the community, Patricia Scott, a well respected elementary teacher with deep roots and family business ties in the community, Brad Irish, James' son and business partner, Lori Manes, a well respected teacher whose family goes back generations in the community, and Bonnie Lincoln, a well respected teacher with many years in the community. Since these people hold no formal positions of power in the school district, their perceived power comes from their reputations as having the ability to influence those who make decisions for the district.

Given the facts known about those on the informal power list, power can be seen as related to being a business leader, or having family ties to business leaders, and having deep roots in the community. Two of the six informal leaders are partners in a major town business.

Two belong to the families of business leaders in the community. All six have deep roots in the community with a minimum of one full generation of residence in Rock Point, while several have multigenerational residence.

The informal power structure can also be divided into three groups: time and contact, business leaders, and community teachers. “Time and contact” refers to those leaders, such as teachers, secretaries, and classroom assistants, who do not keep a regular schedule and who have contact with many members of the community. School nurses, counselors, and custodians fit this category. In Rock Point, only Karen Warner fits this category of the informal power structure. The “business leaders” category refers to those who own major businesses in the greater community. “Community teachers” refers to teachers who have deep roots in the community, having lived there for a generation or more. Figure 2 graphically illustrates the informal power of each of these groups.

#### Limitations

The findings of this study must be considered within its limitations. Framed within elite theory, this study is subject to all of the limitations of that theory. Lutz and Iannaccone (1969) concisely present these limitations. First, this method assumes that informants have the knowledge to provide the necessary data. It also assumes that informants are accurately naming those who really do hold power independent of the views of the whole community of which they are only a sample. Finally, the theory relies on reputation rather than action. It is possible that some people identified seem to have power but really do not while there may also be people with real “behind the scenes” power who are not identified at all. It is also possible that those relative newcomers with a good deal of power have not yet established a reputation that would result in their being named by informants.

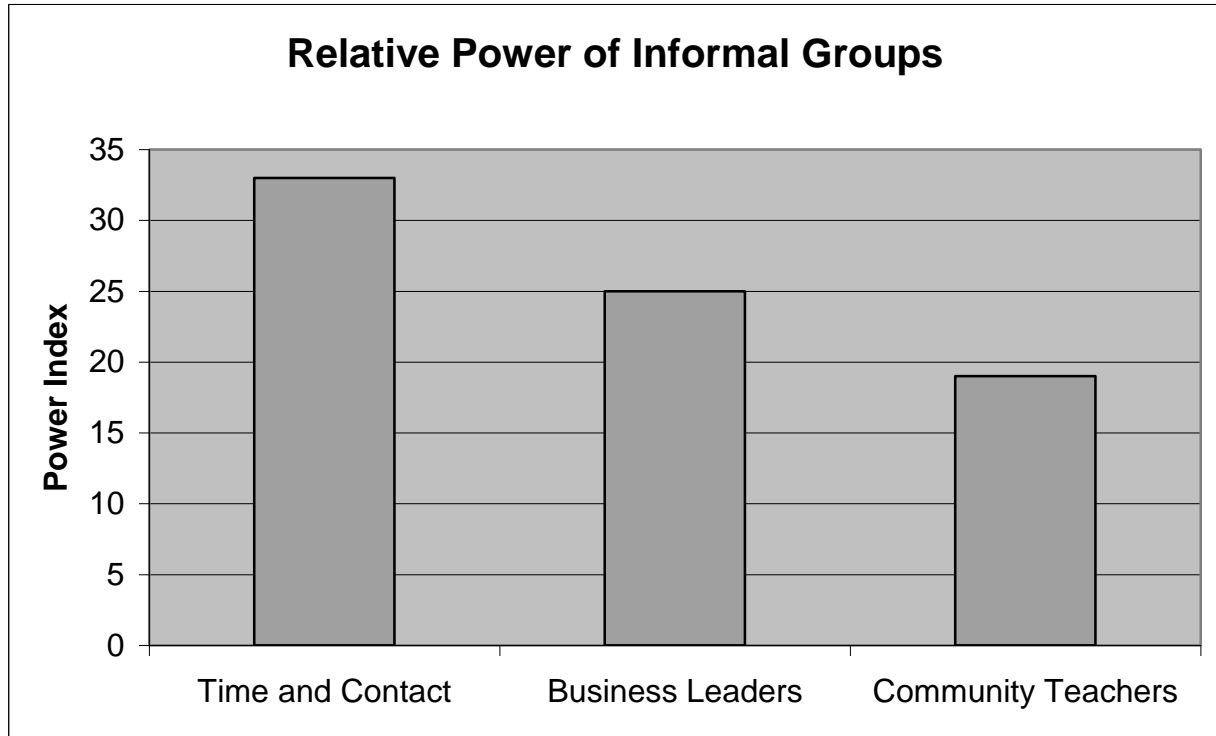


Figure 2. The informal power structure consists of groups with unstructured time and contact with many or all community members, business leaders, and teachers who grew up in the community and whose families have deep roots there. Note that only the school nurse fit the “Time and Contact” category and has a power index score of 33, higher than the school board (see Figure 1). Business leaders, with a power index of 25 tie the school board. Community teachers have a power index score of 19.

This study has limited generalizability. It represents an eye-opening case study of one small town school district. While the results may inform the understanding of other districts, one must consider both the unique characteristics of Rock Point and those of the district in question. The findings here do square with findings of other researchers as mentioned above, making a stronger case for limited generalizability.

This study may also be limited by possible flaws in the methods of data collection discovered during the process of carrying out the research. For example, the first set of names produced by the superintendent was shown, along with subsequent additions, to each informant. This procedure may have skewed the results in favor of the perceptions of the superintendent and other early informants. Evidence of this possibility appears on the cards. For example, the superintendent named Karen Warner, the school nurse, as a power player. The next five informants in a row, informants two through six, all picked her as a power player as did the 11<sup>th</sup> informant. As the number of choices grew, no one else picked her. On the other side of the coin, the high school principal was not named as a power player until the eighth informant added him. After that addition, every other person, informants nine through 19, named him as a significant power player. Nevertheless, the high school principal did rise to number four on the final power list anyway and seven of the 19 informants did pick Karen Warner as a significant power player. It is not likely that any number of additional interviews would change these results significantly. To eliminate the potential flaw, however, future studies should adjust the data collection methods accordingly.

### Conclusions and Implications

Perception of power in Rock Point is strongly related to power of position. As seen in the findings, all but one of 12 people holding positional power in the school district were named as

having power. The three groups holding such power, in order of their perceived power, are the administrative team, with the superintendent decisively at the top of the list, the union leaders, and the school board. Although the school board has less perceived power in general, the vice-chair was perceived as the second most powerful person in the district behind the superintendent. Only two of the top 10 power players did not hold a position of power in the Rock Point School District.

These findings related to positional power have implications for further research. Is the superintendent always decisively seen as having the most power in a school district? Are all administrators in a district always perceived as powerful? How often do school boards have one dominant power player? Do local union leaders always have so much perceived power? Do school boards, in general, always rank lowest in terms of positional power? Are there differences in the power patterns in larger school districts? One could go on at length generating such questions. The main point here is that more research on positional power in school districts would be worthwhile.

The informal power structure is even more attention grabbing. That structure follows patterns discovered by other researchers. For example, Laurence Iannaccone found an extensive informal power structure in the Jefferson and Whitman School Districts (Griffiths, 1962, part 4). Even more remarkable is the fact that a “nurse consultant” headed the “Jensen Pyramid” (Griffiths, p. 272), an informal power structure discovered by Iannaccone in Whitman. The top informal power leader in Rock Point was also the school nurse. It seems as though staff people with time unstructured by the school’s daily schedule, who also have contact with people throughout the district, are in an ideal position to gain informal power. Hunter (1953) provides a



second example. He also found power ties to the business community and the depths of one's roots in the larger community.

Another fascinating finding is related to the purpose of this study in relation to another study regarding the role of the principal in sex and HIV/AIDS education. As mentioned, the results of this study may be useful in shedding light on the other. The two studies progressed simultaneously. Karen Warner's position as the top informal power player has definitely shed light on a conflict discovered in the other study. The principals have been at odds with Mrs. Warner over her desire not to have them observe her in her role as sex and HIV/AIDS instructor. She says their presence in the room detracts from the quality of education because it stifles the students' openness about the subject matter. They have received complaints and have suspicions about what is really going on in the classroom and feel strongly that no employee in their building should have the power to exclude them from routine observations. The past and current superintendents have sided with Karen and kept the principals out. Interestingly, the current superintendent rated her as the fourth most powerful person in the district behind the RPEA president, the business leader James Irish, and an attorney who ended up as number 19 on the overall list. Power, and possibly the desire to avoid controversy, may have influenced the final decision on this conflict.-+

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was met. Both formal and informal power patterns emerged yielding remarkable results. Some of these results squared with the findings of other researchers. This study has implications for further study and has informed additional research already underway.

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