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ABSTRACT

There is ample evidence that the success or failure of school reform lies not only in the soundness and appropriateness of the reform model chosen, but primarily in its perception, acceptance, and endorsement by teachers. This essay expresses the concept of power as it applies to school reform that focuses on teacher empowerment and professionalization. The paper is based on a grounded theory developed from a qualitative case study that assessed the impact of a newly implemented, districtwide staff-development program. The data are analyzed using an ethnosemiotic approach to explain how a fundamental ambivalence in the concepts of "power" and "professionalism" may prevent the reform from succeeding, even in the absence of overt crisis or resistance. Data were gathered through interviews with and observations of 80 teachers and administrators over 7 months. The paper defines power qualitatively in four different modalities--power ("being-able-to-do"), independence ("being-able-not-to-do"), powerlessness ("not-being-able-to-do"), and submission ("not-being-able-not-to-do"). The study found that the reform framers had proceeded upon a series of false assumptions: neglecting to distinguish between having power over someone and having the power to act; treating power quantitatively as a one-dimensional commodity; and equating empowerment with professionalism without establishing a correlation between power and responsibility. Reforms must concentrate on changing the prevalent teacher culture, which is unfavorable to the professional ethic and to the establishment of truly democratic structures. Five figures are included. (Contains 23 references.) (LMI)

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Power Structures, Change, and the Illusion of Democracy: A Semiotic Study of Leadership and Policy-Making

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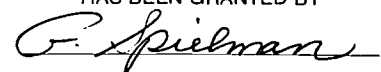
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Power Structures, Change, and the Illusion of Democracy: A Semiotic Study of Leadership and Policy-Making

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Abstract

In this essay, we explore the concept of power as it applies to school reform which focuses on teacher empowerment and professionalization. Our reflections are based on a grounded theory developed from a qualitative case study (Radnofsky & Spielmann, 1995a) in which we assessed the impact of a newly-implemented, district-wide staff development/supervision/evaluation program. By analyzing our data in light of semiotic theory, we explain how a fundamental ambivalence in the concepts of 'power' and 'professionalism' may prevent the reform from succeeding, even in the absence of overt crisis or resistance.

Our work illustrates how an ethnosemiotic approach to understanding school culture can reveal unsuspected attitudes, values, and beliefs which have a central role in how reform is understood, perceived, embraced or rejected. In particular, we show that a preexisting culture of teacher powerlessness may subvert the most carefully-designed plans to promote empowerment and democratization. We therefore argue the necessity that educators who conceive and implement reform — even when (and perhaps especially when) it is site-based — pay particular attention to understanding the coexisting cultures in a given school community.

The ethnosemiotic approach has allowed us to develop a theoretical construct of 'power' as an axiological structure, in other words, a system of values which we can materialize as terms in opposition. This formal-logical structure forces us to consider systematically all the possibilities created by relationships of contrariety and contradiction from the initial term of 'power,' which can be formulated as "being able to do." (Greimas & Courtès, 1982) Four separate terms thus emerge: "being-able-to-do" ('power'); its contrary, "being-able-not-to-do" ('independence'); its contradictory, "not-being-able-to-do" ('powerlessness'); and finally the contrary of its contradictory, "not-being-able-not-to-do." ('submission') These four modalities help define power qualitatively, rather than quantitatively, and account for the variety of values expressed by all respondents, teachers and administrators.

We found that reform framers had proceeded upon a series false assumptions. First, they neglected to distinguish between having power *over* someone and having the power to act (i.e. being-able-to-do), although the two are not interchangeable. Second, they treated power (in the second sense) quantitatively as a one-dimensional commodity, not realizing that it involved four modalities, and believing that it would be adequate to merely transfer some amount of it from administrators to teachers. Last, but perhaps most importantly, they equated empowerment with professionalism, without establishing a correlation between power and responsibility.

Our essay emphasizes the importance of understanding this qualitative aspect of power, and the correlation between power and responsibilities which characterizes an ethic of professionalism — and must be carefully cultivated. We conclude that reformers have to concentrate their efforts on changing the prevalent teacher culture, which is unfavorable to the professional ethic and to the establishment of truly democratic structures.

Introduction

There is ample evidence that the success or failure of school reform lies not only in the soundness and appropriateness of the reform model chosen, or in the efficacy with which it is implemented, but also and primarily in its perception, acceptance and endorsement by teachers, who can otherwise keep any “trickle-down” (Wimpelberg & Ginsberg, 1987) policies from reaching the classrooms. Although this proviso might appear commonsensical enough in massive, top-down reform of large urban districts, such as the Chicago reforms of the 1980s (e.g. Radnofsky, 1992), it is no less valid in small districts attempting grass-roots, site-based reform. This is because a certain degree of familiarity between administrators and teachers may create the illusion that the school community represents a single unified culture, when in fact two very distinct, if not antagonistic, cultures are in presence.

The case we discuss here is all the more remarkable, as the Larkman School District (a pseudonym) took great pride in the congeniality of relations between school personnel, in its friendly atmosphere, and in the fact that its brand-new Staff Development, Supervision and Evaluation Program (SDSEP), which we were hired to investigate, had been designed by a joint committee of administrators and teachers. None of the members of this committee (i.e. the “framers”) suspected the extent to which their own culture was considered alien (although not necessarily in a pejorative sense) by a majority of teachers in the district — a rift which, for all intents and purposes, canceled out whatever benefits the new program might have offered.

The tenor of our research findings, which sharply contradicted the committee’s preliminary impressions, reflected our status as complete outsiders to the school community. Far from constituting a hindrance, however, being outsiders afforded us an aura of impartiality which led our informants to give, under guaranteed anonymity, a frank account of their understanding and appreciation of the program. It also forced us to approach the program as an entirely new construct whose history, connotations and implications we would have to discover entirely, contrary to the program’s framers, who had worked at length on its development.

The ethnographic approach of seeking to discover a “grounded theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was therefore perfectly suited to the outside evaluation we were conducting: without any previous knowledge of the new program or its predecessor, we would have to piece together from scratch, on the basis of documents, interviews and observations, an understanding of how this program existed and functioned within the Larkman school culture — a culture which it was intended to change.

Research Questions

Our first concern was not so much about SDSEP’s function, but, more fundamentally, about its identity. We thus began by changing the research question as the committee had defined it: find out whether the program “was working,” i.e., having an effect on the teaching/learning process by enhancing the “professionalism” of all school personnel. Pursuing this question would have meant assuming not only that “professionalism” constituted a clearly-defined variable, but that it could have distinguishable effects. Further, and more simply still, it would have meant assuming that SDSEP was being implemented in the way it was designed just because the program was now “in place,” and because all school personnel had attended information workshops about it, then submitted to its procedures.

As we immediately pointed out to the committee, none of these assumptions could safely be made. Our own policy would be to assume nothing, and stay within the bounds of what we could see and hear, in order to ground our emerging theory in the data only, without formulating any preconceived hypotheses. We would then investigate the Larkman culture in its basic constitutive elements, in order to determine its axiological structure, i.e. the values and the relationships between them which guide people’s attitudes, behaviors and thinking. Our own research questions could then be stated as follows:

- On which system of values was the Staff Development, Supervision and Evaluation Program (SDSEP) articulated?
- How did this system relate to the teachers’ own value system(s)?
- How did the teachers’ value system(s) translate into perceptions of SDSEP and attitudes towards it?
- How did these attitudes and perceptions translate into daily practice by school personnel?

Methodology

As we entered the research setting during the 1992-93 school year, we took as a premise that members of a given culture have varying perspectives on how it is run, how they fit into the community, how programs work, and how change might be effected. We recognized that these perspectives combine to create a mosaic of multiple realities which must be understood as a whole (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Since “no a priori theory could possibly encompass the multiple realities that are likely to be encountered” (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 41) in academic institutions, we could not justify formulating hypotheses and verifying them through quantitative methodology. On the other hand, since qualitative methodology consists of the *discovery* of theory, we deliberately opted for the “Grounded Theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach.

Data collection occurs “in the field” through one or more of the following strategies: participant-observation, listening, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, document analysis. Data collection proceeds until enough examples or descriptions of a certain phenomenon are given such that “saturation” occurs, that is, when any further examples of that particular behavior or attitude become redundant in the process of discovering a theory. During data collection, a “debriefing” (usually not part of the setting) advises the researcher on methodological and ethical issues, identifies paths to pursue, challenges inadequately supported theories, and suggests questions to be asked in return interviews or observations.

“Field notes” document every observation, providing the deep background, the “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the setting that contributes to the trustworthiness of the research. For example, *Methodological Notes* describe procedures to collect or analyze data; *Personal Notes* trace personal feelings, health, problems, anxieties; *Research Notes* lead to related studies; *Interview Notes* are verbatim (or as close to possible) transcriptions of interchanges; and *Theoretical Notes* reflect thoughts and development of the grounded theory.

To establish confidence in the findings, four concerns must be addressed:

Credibility (or “truth value,” which generally corresponds to validity in quantitative research) is established by showing that the multiple constructions of reality are well represented based on prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, member checks, and providing an audit trail.

Dependability (or “consistency,” which generally corresponds to reliability in quantitative research) is established by showing that findings have been triangulated, are traceable through an audit trail, and have emerged in methodological and theoretical notes.

Confirmability (or “neutrality”) is established by showing that the findings are indeed those of the participants, and have not been determined by a researcher’s biases or motivations; this is achieved through triangulation, an audit trail, and a reflexive journal to make explicit the researcher’s perspective and any possibility of having “gone native.”

Transferability, (or “applicability”) is established by providing enough “thick description” of the setting and events that the reader is easily able to apply appropriate findings to another context. “At best, the investigator can supply a judgment of transferability to some other site; the final judgment on that matter is, however, vested in the person seeking to make the transfer, who must be in possession of similar data for the receiving context” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 217).

At the end of data collection, researchers must classify and transcribe hundreds of hours of audio- and videotapes, drawings, hand-written notes and artifacts in preparation for coding and analysis. Categories of discourse, behavior, events, interactions, phenomena, etc. emerge from the data through the process of “constant comparisons” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967): comparing — during and after data collection — the most recently-coded events with previously categorized ones, in order to identify emergent characteristics or properties distinctive enough to justify creating a new category that better describes them. Constant comparison is facilitated by the *Chromacode* (Radnofsky, 1995) data analysis system, which

provides color coding, categorizing, and cross-referencing schemes that allow the researcher to analyze any set of qualitative data, permitting text retrieval a) by respondent; b) by theme and/or by respondent; c) by original code; d) by frequency of themes; and e) by frequency of reference to the core category — the one to which most of the others refer, and around which the theory is built.

Qualitative research is usually reported in the form of case studies or stories. These are narratives which provide an extremely rich picture of the setting and the events that led to the discovery of the grounded theory. Contextualized analyses of particular anecdotes, quotes, and incidents are amply provided, in order to give the reader a sense of “being there,” and to facilitate transferability of the grounded theory to a new setting.

Site, Participants, and Timeline

Larkman (a pseudonym) is an independent school district with about 200 teachers, and approximately 2700 students. It is composed of five buildings (two elementary, two middle and a high school) located in a middle-class, mostly white and hispanic suburb of a large U.S. city. Per-student spending, at \$12,000, was well above the national average. This research involved interviewing and observing 80 members of the community over seven months: district and building administrators, as well as teachers in all grades, specialties and at all levels of seniority.

Data Collection

We interviewed our respondents, sometimes twice, for periods ranging from one to four hours. We also conducted on-site observations, which were recorded on audiotape and/or in field notes. It was crucial to the development of a grounded theory that we use non-leading questions in the semi-structured interviews (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), and not formulate or provide pre-determined answers. Without resorting to convergent questioning, we asked our informants to tell us about the program, their understanding of it and their impressions about it. By and large, what they had to say (or cared to say) dictated how the interview unfolded, how long it lasted, and which topics were given the most emphasis.

Data Analysis

Once transcribed, interviews were processed using *Chromacode* (Radnofsky, 1994) and triangulated with printed documents from the Larkman district, as well as with our methodological, debriefing and field notes accumulated over the previous seven months. Our approach consisted of analyzing, from a semiotic perspective, the discourse on SDSEP as evidenced in interviews, but also in official documents, so that we might understand exactly what this program *meant* to all constituencies involved, before investigating what it *did*. Given that personal commitment to and understanding of the new program was presented by its framers as essential to its nature and to its success, it seemed indispensable to discover how teachers and administrators would articulate their understanding of the program in their own words, and with as little prompting as possible.

The contribution of semiotic theory was to provide a formal framework with which to make sense of the data not only in the final analysis, but in the process of collection as well. Although its formalist nature might seem at first antithetical to the pragmatism of ethnographic fieldwork, semiotics has proven an invaluable tool in the interpretation of cultures (Geertz, 1973 and 1983; Manning, 1987; Nöth, 1995). In this particular case, the concepts of axiology (values system) and of modality as defined by Greimas and Courtès (1982) allowed us to map out the structures governing the perception and uses of power in the school district.

Description of the Staff Development/Supervision/Evaluation Program (SDSEP)

In 1988, the superintendent appointed a 12-member committee with equal representation of teachers and administrators to assess the staff evaluation program. The committee immediately recommended the creation of a more comprehensive “professional growth program”, which would “instill and enhance the respect and trust between and amongst the professional staff” (SDSEP *Notebook*, p. I-3). They expressed the belief “that education and educators must strive for professional/instructional improvement through Staff Development, Supervision and Evaluation — all three phases being mutually supportive and interdependent.”

With funding from the district, they developed SDSEP over the course of five years on the basis of what was described as a considerable amount of preliminary research both on the theory of site-based management and teacher empowerment, and on actual programs established in comparable school districts. SDSEP's avowed goal was to increase "professionalism" by treating each and everyone as a responsible, independent individual, to be collegially supported and counseled by each other.

The emphasis was on empowering teachers to make choices on their own development, on the modalities of their evaluation and on their working relationships with others in the district. Most of the newly-created procedures in all three areas were of an interactive nature, with much flexibility built in — all in contrast to the purely evaluative old system, which involved ticking off objectives on a checklist.

In SDSEP, each year, teachers and administrators would meet with their immediate superior and together draft a plan outlining projected activities and goals in each of the three categories for an "Annual Performance Review" (APR). The content of the plan was mostly open to discussion, except when it came to "in-depth evaluations," which occurred every three years (although not for untenured teachers, who were placed in-depth for two years in a row) and involved 25% of the staff at any given time. "Being in depth" meant a more intense schedule of visits by the evaluator, with pre- and post-observation conferences.

"Supervision" was described as "a non-evaluative process [...] to assist and support staff in improving and enhancing their educational practices." It included six "supervisory" modes (expert coaching, peer coaching, mentoring, clinical supervision, collaboration and self-improvement), which were to play an important role in the professionalization of staff.

"Development" did not seem fundamentally different from the usual in-service requirements.

"Facilitators" were appointed in each school to disseminate and explain SDSEP, assist staff with the finer points of the program, and serve as mediators between staff and administration if conflicts were to arise.

In 1990, the program was piloted on a limited basis, reviewed by the district's own specialist for evaluation in June 1991, and then implemented district-wide for two years, at which point the committee decided to hire outside evaluators.

Questions of Identity

Our final report to the committee was structured around a fourfold core category emerging from the data: (1) **Professionalism**, interpreted as a redistribution of (2) **Power** in favor of teachers (relative to their level of (3) **Information**), towards (4) **Democratization** of the school. The ethnosemiotic approach yielded a precise description of the cultural rift between the program's framers — teachers and administrators — and the rest of the school staff, showing how the fundamental causes of SDSEP's ineffectuality could be traced back to conceptual differences which lay hidden beneath a seemingly unidimensional discourse on "professionalism."

Notwithstanding the committee's implicit assumption that the program was a known quantity, and known in the same way by all, it eventually became obvious to us that the very identity of SDSEP was at issue. Faced with great diversity in our respondents' perceptions, we tried to look for a fixed point of reference against which to gauge these perceptions, and found only a sparse, 25-page *Program Notebook*, which we originally took to be a digest. In fact, no extensive public documentation existed on the program's creation, except minutes of committee meetings.

It appeared that SDSEP's only real substance was that of a fiduciary contract between the board, the administration and, quite indirectly, the staff; it was an agreement only as binding as the good will of all parties involved to abide by its terms. From what most respondents told us, it was not even clear to them whether SDSEP was a creation of the administration or the union, or whether it had a separate identity of its own — nor did this seem to matter. Whether they liked the program or not, teachers *accepted* it, simply because it had been presented by the administration and the union as a *fait accompli*. No one, even those who were extremely displeased by it, hinted that its legitimacy could or should somehow be

challenged; when serious problems arose, teachers went to their union representative for assistance, which they would have done anyway. This was one of the first indicators suggesting our emergent grounded theory: SDSEP fell squarely within the existing power structure, where union officers already figured very prominently in power and decision-making roles.

In fact, since in most cases the “facilitator” also acted as union representative, issues related to SDSEP proper could not easily be distinguished from those normally falling under union jurisdiction. From the teachers’ perspective, the program was considered *de facto* under union control, although nothing in the program’s description stated that it had to be controlled by the union, nor did the union even want it officially brought into contract negotiations. Yet SDSEP was never described to us as a teacher-designed program (except by its framers). On the contrary, it was treated as any other program that the administration could have mandated unilaterally.

Nevertheless, union control was not perceived in a negative light. This is not surprising in school cultures, where teachers have been historically unaccustomed to having individual voices and are content to delegate their power to the union, as long as they are left alone to teach in what they perceive to be their real domain of power: the classroom.

In order to theorize this phenomenon, we must consider the distinction between four possible modes of thymic categorization of perceived realities, on which have insisted elsewhere in our ethnographic research (Radnofsky & Spielmann, 1995b): *euphoric* (perceived to be good) and *dysphoric* (perceived to be bad), but also *non-euphoric* and *non-dysphoric*, which together form a quadripartite logical structure visualized in a “semiotic square” (Greimas & Courtès, 1982; see Figure 1).¹

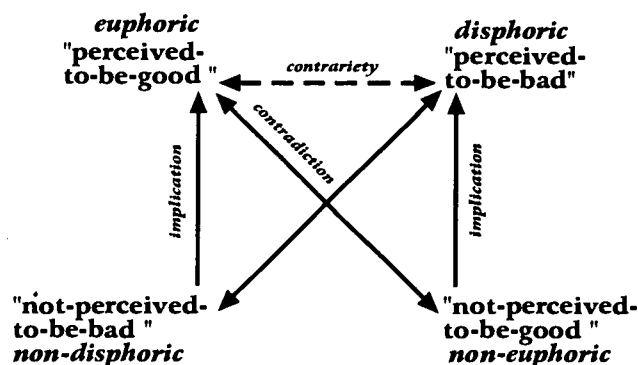


Figure 1. Alethic modalities projected on a semiotic square.

Practically speaking, this helps us establish formal distinctions between phenomena or states which are perceived to have a certain quality and those perceived *not* to have a certain quality, because in logical terms, the absence of a quality is different from the presence of the opposite quality. For instance, SDSEP was described only by a small disgruntled minority as dysphoric; a large majority saw it as either non-euphoric or non-dysphoric, i.e. “not doing any good” or “not doing any harm.” An experienced teacher, having stated that SDSEP was “not important,” went on to comment on its as a distinctively non-dysphoric entity:

“It hasn’t changed my job, [...] hasn’t changed me professionally. [...] This kind of stuff didn’t bother me before, and it doesn’t bother me now.”

This type of discursive framing goes to show that teachers perceived such a program — or any reform program, for that matter — as dysphoric *a priori*. Framers, however, described the program as euphoric, ignoring the dominant teacher culture, and implicitly believing that most teachers would ultimately come to see it their way. In fact, the purported goal of changing the school culture could have been attained only if a majority of teachers had somehow been made to consider the program euphoric as well;

¹ The semiotic square is directly adapted from Aristotle’s logic.

but the measures taken for dissemination of SDSEP were quite insufficient to reach this goal.

Indeed, teachers' (mis)perceptions seemed germane to their incomplete and often erroneous understanding of the program, stemming in part from the paucity of information available. Framers spoke to us of the *Notebook* as "a living document" intended to be constantly revised and amended, and as something that did have all the dimensions and ambitions of a true constitution. They described it as a document which would redefine the rights and responsibilities of all "citizens" in the district and establish a new atmosphere of professionalism, collegiality and trust.

These grand designs, however, were thwarted by the *Notebook's* lack of substance. It may well be true, as the framers argued, that a more substantial document would have been useless, because people would not have read it anyway; yet, it should not have been assumed that the *Notebook's* sole purpose was to serve as a kind of prospectus for SDSEP, when in fact it constituted the only reference document available to the school community, especially newly hired teachers — and, of course, to outsiders like us.

Although there is no assurance that teachers would have gone back to a more comprehensive document when questions arose, the fact is that, with nothing else to refer to, they could only remain in the dark or consult with a facilitator (i.e. a framer and/or union representative). While it is one of the facilitators' functions to clarify matters, the lack of substantive documentation cast them in the role of oracles, interpreters of a somewhat cryptic program, and as such, holders of great power, which created yet another obstacle to fostering a "sense of collective ownership" that was described to us as fundamental to SDSEP — and which we came to recognize as a sine qua non condition for euphoric perception.

As long as SDSEP existed mostly as a concept in its framers' minds, and knowledge about it was brokered by a few individuals closely involved with it, the sense of collective ownership would remain a fiction.²

As a result, SDSEP was very widely construed not as a "new constitution for the district," but, far more prosaically, as a replacement for the previous, traditional teacher evaluation program. The framers did not seem aware that, in the typical school power structure, self-described "rank-and-file teachers" (in other words, the silent majority, those who are disenfranchised and feel it) tend to regard *all* reform efforts as impositions from above or from the outside, a categorization which precludes ownership, and consequently euphoric perception.

In addition, this state of affairs imperiled the future integrity of the program when the framers would no longer control it; unfortunately, they seemed resigned to that prospect and had manifestly not thought of the program beyond their own involvement. Their "sense of collective ownership" was so strong as to exclude sharing it with others — in flagrant contradiction to the alleged goal set for SDSEP.

As a result, the image of SDSEP for a majority of the teachers with whom we spoke was that of a program established "from above," which they did not fully understand, and which they had no particular desire to understand any better, as long as such ignorance did not disrupt their life and their teaching. More precisely, when teachers were asked in a non-directive way to describe the program, they spontaneously and unanimously spoke about evaluation, and more specifically about "in-depth" evaluation, as if "evaluation" were, for all intents and purposes, synonymous with the entire SDSEP. Such reductionism was hardly surprising, since evaluation represented the one occurrence when the new power relationships promised by SDSEP would be tested.

² We predicted a worsening of the problem once current facilitators, almost all participants in the creation of SDSEP, would be replaced by individuals who did not benefit from the mass information that was exchanged informally in the course of the development process. The spirit the program would only remain intact as long as its framers administered it, or could be consulted to answer questions; in all likelihood, occurrences of misconceptions about its identity, purpose and implementation would increase exponentially as time passes.

Power

Even though no document explicitly discussed redistributing some of the power normally vested in school and central administration, this was clearly an implicit goal of the program: in fact, one of the framers was quoted as saying that teachers “would take the power out of the principals’ hands.”

Indeed, “teacher empowerment” has become somewhat of a catchphrase of educational reform rhetoric (e.g. Maeroff, 1988; Radnofsky, 1994), although what it entails is often far from clear, and various interpretations of what “power” is and how it should be meted out will result in sharply divergent attitudes. In the case of the Larkman School District, SDSEP was designed to impart “professionalism” in all school personnel, and being a professional practically translated into having the power to make various decisions which would have previously been the prerogative of administrators alone.

In fact, “professionalism” has in turn been embraced as an all-purpose reform ideal, although its implications remain far from clear (Burbules & Densmore, 1991). Although the term would indeed prove subject to diverse understandings within Larkman, one aspect seemed incontrovertible: as “professionals,” teachers or administrators were described as equals, and thus as enjoying a commensurate amount of independence. Teachers, whose status had resembled that of subjects in a monarchy, had become citizens of a republic, enjoying new rights, but also bearing new responsibilities — or at least, such was the impression given by SDSEP framers and the *Notebook*. Reality would turn out to be very different.

To understand what these terms mean, we have to recognize first that empowerment is, almost by definition, a top-down process occurring in a hierarchical socio-political structure; in a school, this means that power can only be granted “from above,” by those who originally hold it — administrators (See, for example, Elmore & Associates, 1990). Reflecting on this issue, Sarason (1990) writes:

In my dictionary, the first of several definitions of power is “possession of control, or authority, or influence over others.” Another, more muted, definition given is “the ability to act or produce an effect.” The first definition emphasizes a feature of interpersonal relationships, which explains why in that context the exercise of power is so frequently accompanied by conflict. To have power “over” someone is an invitation to conflict.... It is the first definition that is appropriate to the aims of unions seeking to restrict the range and substance of actions of those with legal authority for the school system. It is an openly adversarial relationship in which power suffuses the thinking of all participants and is most clearly demonstrated by strike action. No one is in doubt that power is the name of the game. (p. 49)

Although, theoretically, SDSEP was not in any way related to union activity, all teachers who sat on the steering committee were or had been officers in the Larkman Teachers’ Association, and most of them had also become facilitators. In fact, while we conducted our research, the LTA was involved in a contract dispute with the administration and organized after-class picketing of the schools, which made all the more obvious that this union wielded considerable influence in the community. Yet, there was a concerted effort to pretend and make believe that SDSEP constituted an issue unrelated to union business, in other words, separate from the school district’s power structure.

The rank-and-file teachers, however, made no secret of their belief that SDSEP, for all intents and purposes, represented another form of union activity. In spite of its practical justifications — only union leaders, for instance, seemed capable of dealing with administrators on a truly equal footing —, this state of affairs seemed to render impossible the development of “professionalism” as SDSEP envisioned it, because union hegemony helped maintain the traditional power structure rather than challenge it. Ultimately, democratization and professionalization could only be achieved if all constituencies were given equal opportunity to exercise whatever power they were entitled to, which supposed:

- a) that they were well informed about what their powers were, and how they could be exercised;
- b) that they fully realized and understood the positive and negative aspects of holding and exercising power;

- c) that it was made logistically possible for them to exercise power, so that they were not actively or passively prevented from doing so;
- d) that they were actively encouraged and supported to exercise power; and
- e) that it was made culturally possible for them to hold and exercise power, even if the culture did not already exist and had to be developed.

None of these criteria were fulfilled satisfactorily by SDSEP.

Even if we temporarily set aside the problem of an unchanged hierarchy between staff members, the definition of 'power' as "the ability to act and produce an effect" needs clarifying. To say that this definition is "more muted" implies a quantitative concept of power as a one-dimensional commodity that one can possess in various degrees. Instead, we wish to emphasize here a qualitative approach, because four possible modalities are conceivable in a logico-semantic perspective: the basic predicate expressing 'power,' "being-able-to-do" allows to deduce three new modalities derived by relationships of contradiction and contrariety: "being-able-not-to-do" (or 'independence'), "not-being-able-to-do" (or 'powerlessness'), and "not-being-able-not-to-do" (or 'submission') (Greimas & Courtès, 1982). We can also visualize these modalities in a semiotic square, as illustrated in Figure 2.

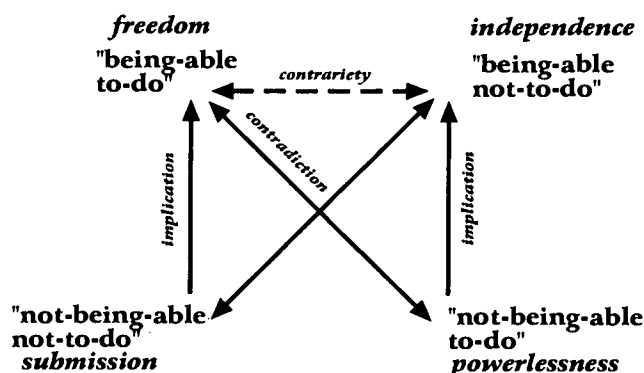


Figure 2. Modalities of power projected on a semiotic square

Such distinctions are important because they help illustrate how empowerment can fail, even though technically it appears that the conditions have been met for it to work. In the traditional power structure, the status of teachers is characterized both by 'powerlessness' and 'submission'; they cannot do what they want to do (except teach inside their classrooms however they see fit, whenever they are not being observed), nor can they refuse to do what is demanded of them.

However, school reformers routinely assume that there is but one mode of power (being-able-to-do) and that teachers who are granted this power will automatically use it to do something they could not do before; this has proved to be a rather disastrous flaw in logic. Research on the impact of school reform on classroom practices has demonstrated that, more often than not, teachers choose to exercise instead their independence ("being able not to do") to ignore or refuse the chance to partake in decision-making, collaborative teaching, school governance, or curriculum design (e.g. Radnofsky, 1994). Having realized that all-purpose empowerment does not necessarily translate into positive change, or even into a desire to change, we have to ask ourselves why.

In the traditional structure of schools, as in any hierarchy, power is construed as something to be exerted over someone else, which, as indicated in the above quote by Sarason (1990), is "an invitation to conflict," leading to "an openly adversarial relationship." Culturally, then, power is not something that teachers feel is truly theirs, nor are they used to exerting it in a constructive, positive way; however much they get is "taken away from the hands of the administrators," and used mostly in a defensive way. Under these circumstances, the notion that a true balance between all "professionals" can be achieved is nothing short of utopian unless the power structure is thoroughly deconstructed and constructed anew; in spite of the somewhat bombastic claims made by the framers, there was no evidence to be found that SDSEP had prompted such a radical process.

The perception that it had (or could), as we progressively discovered, only came from those teachers who had already accumulated several sources of power: they were tenured, with a long record of presence at Larkman, and past or present office in the union. Under the old system, they already enjoyed as much independence as any teacher could possibly have, which put them just one step away from the positive exercise of power (being-able-to-do) to which “rank-and-file” teachers could not even aspire. For most of their colleagues used to submission or powerlessness, independence (being-able-not-to-do) constituted the ultimate goal that SDSEP could allow them to reach.

By failing to recognize the existence of various modes of power, the framers had adopted a one-dimensional model of empowerment and therefore vastly underestimated the cultural gap between the teachers’ actual status and the professionalism they were supposed to suddenly embrace. In addition, and perhaps more seriously, another crucial component of professionalism had been overlooked within SDSEP: responsibility.

Responsibility

“Professionalism” cannot merely amount to enjoying certain rights; with it also come responsibilities. As one administrator bluntly pointed out, “Professional doesn’t mean you get to do whatever the hell you want.” Indeed, the statement of purpose for the program affirmed that “the individual staff member has a responsibility to himself/herself, to the district and to the students to continue growing as a professional.” (*Notebook*, I-3). Such responsibility, defined only in overly vague terms, seemed again predicated on the goodwill of individuals alone.

As a logico-semantic category, however, responsibility must be subdivided into four *deontic modalities* — “having-to-do,” (‘prescription’) “not-having-to-do” (‘optionality’), “having-not-to-do” (‘prohibition’) and “not-having-not-to-do” (‘permission’) (Greimas & Courtès, 1982; See Figure 3).

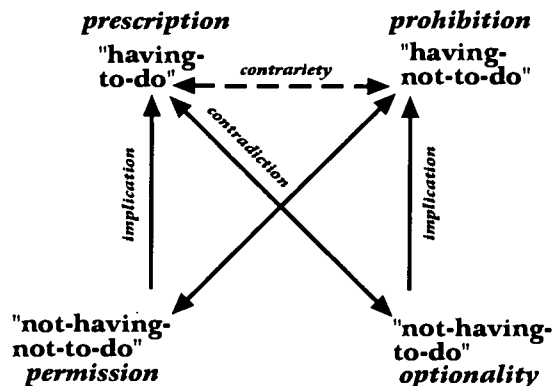


Figure 3. deontic modalities projected on a semiotic square.

How did these modalities fit with the committee’s ideal of professionalism? Theoretically, SDSEP included measures towards:

- a) involving all personnel actively in their own evaluation;
- b) affording all personnel control over their professional development;
- c) granting all personnel more independence in the conduct of their professional life;
- d) fostering collegiality between teachers, and between teachers and administrators;
- e) trusting teachers with self-governance by not systematically checking up on all aspects of their self-assigned career plans; and
- f) promoting some teachers to supervisory capacities as experts.

By and large, these objectives amounted to giving teachers more power (e.g., the power to choose, or at least negotiate, the features on their plans and the modalities of observation), but offered no real counterpart in terms of prescription; in fact, where in the old system prescription and prohibition had existed, they were now being replaced by optionality or permission (e.g, to pursue development options

without being held accountable; to be able to resist imposition or intrusion by administrators). On the other hand, no new responsibilities (in the sense of “having-to-do”) were imposed on them, no additional demands made, and no more stringent standards of excellence applied.

Although involvement in SDSEP was mandatory for all, only one true obligation obtained: to submit oneself to periodical evaluation, which had always existed under previous programs anyway — the difference being that teachers had been given considerably more control over how they would be evaluated. We found out that all other apparent obligations were perceived as wholly unsubstantial by most teachers, who simply eschewed them by exercising optionality (not-having-to-do) or permission (not-having-not-to-do).

As SDSEP was heavily influenced by union representatives, the outside observer may well conclude that it constitutes, in essence, a “shadow contract” that creates a number of officious rights in addition to the official ones, but imposes no extra official obligations in return. Since officious obligations appeared almost entirely dependent upon an individual’s adherence to the spirit of the program, those devoid of any “sense of collective ownership” towards SDSEP would predictably opt to exercise their new rights, especially in a defensive or negative modality, but take none of the responsibilities.

The Cultural Divide

We were obviously dealing with two cultures: that of the rank-and-file teachers on one hand, and on the other hand that of administrators and already powerful teachers whose values were embodied in SDSEP. Tellingly enough, teachers often lumped the latter into a single entity referred to as “them,” wherein the administration and the union were both construed as holders of power, in opposition to (and not just separate from) the powerless “us.”

SDSEP’s failure in terms of its self-imposed goal to make professionals out of teachers should not necessarily be blamed on a design flaw, or even on poor implementation, but on the framer’s misunderstanding of the scope and depth of necessary change. They proceeded, as have numerous restructuring schools in the past decade (See, for example, Malen & Ogawa, 1988), according to several leaps of faith, none of which proved warranted: (1) that SDSEP would improve instruction by making teachers more professional; (2) that professionalism could be induced by giving teachers more power; (3) that teachers would exert their new power in a positive, constructive way, rather than defensively; (4) that teachers would voluntarily take on new responsibilities; and most of all, (5) that generous proclamations about professionalism and the implementation of a staff development and evaluation program were enough to install an entirely new culture at Larkman.

To conceive empowerment as a transfer of power from administration to teachers ignores the issue of cultural change, and leaves intact the rift between “them” and “us”; it merely evens out the balance between the parties on each side of the divide. Ideally, there should be a two-way process involving teachers taking responsibility, even when, in the absence of sanctions, they do not absolutely have to. Theoretically, this self-imposed sense of responsibility would correlate with the exercise of power to define a true “professional.” In other words, a teacher’s sense of having-to-do (or having-not-to-do) should no longer be interpreted as meeting demands from above with little say in the matter. The problem was that in practice, teachers, when given the choice, reverted to their preferred mode of not-having-to-do, or not-having-not-to-do.

At Larkman, as indeed in many school cultures, teachers still reasoned within a traditional paradigm wherein they could only construe exercising power as a defense against the administration. By contrast, the culture of professionalism as SDSEP envisioned it would have meant overlapping the axiological structures we have outlined above, so as to make ‘power’ (being-able-to-do) correlate with both contraries on the deontic square, ‘prescription’ (having-to-do) and ‘prohibition’ (having-not-to-do). ‘Freedom’ (being-able-not-to-do) would correlate with both subcontraries on the deontic square, ‘permission’ (not-having-not-to-do) and ‘optionality’ (not-having-to-do). (Figure 4)

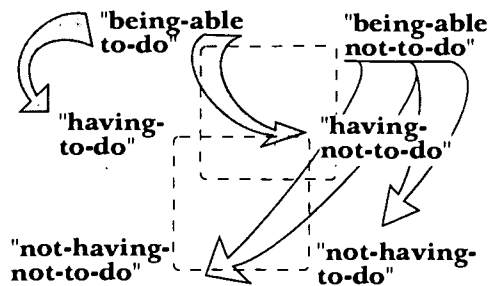


Fig 4. Axiological correlates in the Framers' culture

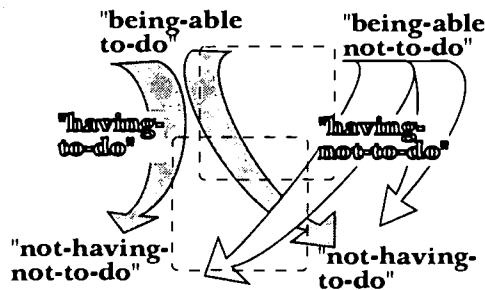


Fig 5. Axiological correlates in the teachers' culture

The question was then to find out why the projected shift had not happened, given the well-meaning intentions of the framers, and the sincerity of administrators in wanting to bring about change. Our analysis of the data brought to light the “fatal flaw” of the program: as designed, SDSEP made it necessary for individuals to impose upon themselves a sense of responsibility in proactive rather than reactive ways, so that, paradoxically, the proposed goal of fostering teacher professionalism could only have been attained in a cultural setting where such professionalism already existed. Professionalism and the set of values it demanded could not be induced by setting up a program which would merely allow these values to express themselves, without attending specifically to instilling them in all staff members..

In practical terms, we found that unawareness of this paradox and of the cultural rift underlying it had led to a statu quo of sorts: administrators and “powerful” teachers already considered themselves professionals and acted accordingly; for them, professionalism was not at issue, and SDSEP would only enhance their opportunities. For others, SDSEP’s implementation meant little more than procedural change — for the better when they felt less accountable towards the administration, for the worse when they felt that going through the program was one more imposition they did not need.

Generally, however, what we heard and saw kept confirming that the program left most constituencies unconcerned: senior staff thought that it was best suited for their novice colleagues; novices figured that they had no say in the matter anyway; and administrators indicated that this was really a program for teachers.

We did find a few teachers who felt invigorated by the program and by the options offered in the supervisory modes; in their discourse, they tended to equate professionalism with terms such as “innovation” and “experimentation,” but also with “flexibility” and “freedom.” They seemed to have understood the spirit of the SDSEP, and were ready and willing to take full advantage of the opportunities it afforded them. Unfortunately, they were in the minority

A far more common type of remark — ironically meant to express appreciation of the program — referred to being “left alone”; one teacher encapsulated this view in her pronouncement that “Basically I’m left on my own, which is kind of nice in a way. They treat me kind of like a complete professional.” Indeed, we found that teachers’ perception of being a “complete professional” mostly derived from not being monitored or told what to do; in other words, from independence, permission and optionality as defined above. In fact, tenured teachers frequently expressed the belief that it was their *right* to not be

bothered with such nuisances as evaluations, so that in their eyes, SDSEP had merely redressed an injustice.

The cultural rift within Larkman acted as much more than an obstacle to the success of SDSEP: it grew wider as a result of the program's implementation, as most teachers quickly became disenchanted with the apparent lack of impact on their life at the school. This, in a vicious circle, bred ever growing diffidence and disenfranchisement. Without a vested interest in understanding SDSEP beyond the most routine requirements — i.e., those of evaluation — most teachers remained ignorant about the particulars of a program that was supposed to radically change their status and their practice.

Information and Misinformation

In our analysis, access to information, and the desire to obtain information appeared as another correlate to the exercise of power. Information is not a neutral quantity, but a very real source of power to those who control it; a professional is also someone who is informed, able to know where and how to find information, and who uses the information s/he has gathered in order to make decisions: s/he is an *executive*. By contrast, the non-professional is handed information on a limited basis, and is usually trusted with just enough of it to complete a specific task: s/he is an *executant*.

Because the executant does not have the power to make decisions, s/he has little incentive to learn where and how to gather information, even when it is available. We found in the teachers' situation strong echoes of a predicament described by Apple (1990):

...because of the current structural crisis in the economic, political, and cultural spheres of social life, the primary elements used to organize and control the labor process in our society — among them the separation of mental from manual labor, the divorce of conception from execution, the logic of de-skilling and controlling a work-force — all are being reconstituted in complex and paradoxical ways in schools at the present time. (p. 34)

Although the very principle of SDSEP seemed to be a reversal of this process, its design and implementation did little to deconstruct the labor mentality preventing teachers from attaining or even aspiring to a professional status. The dissemination of information was emblematic of the gap between principle and practice.

Our own experience showed how difficult it could be to piece together all the information that existed about SDSEP, because so little of it was written down formally. After reading the *Notebook* and talking at length to those who could explain the subtleties of the program, we arrived at a fairly satisfactory understanding of it, but realized that most teachers in the district would never have such an opportunity. Indeed, the committee's intent was to avoid disseminating more information than they deemed necessary, on the premise that people would not retain it anyway.

Contrary to the framers' belief that all teachers would understand the details of SDSEP while in the "in-depth," stage of the program, we found that many of those who were, or had been, "in-depth" still did not understand how the program worked, what its philosophy was — and, more importantly, did not see why they should try to find out more about it. They could go through the motions and rely on their evaluator or facilitator to map out for them what they should be doing to fulfill the requirements. As long as they showed the expected behaviors and played the game, their understanding of — not to mention their adherence to — the philosophy of the program remained beyond ascertainment.

Although our research did confirm that the vast majority of teachers had retained very little from SDSEP orientation sessions, dissemination of information on a "need-to-know" basis meant, in practice, that further disclosures would come about only when a problem arose. Those who adequately complied with the procedures might never encounter a problem and thus never be forced (or enticed) to learn more about the program — a situation which contradicted once again the claim to professionalism by casting teachers as executants rather than as executives.

The result here, too, was an essentially passive stance towards the program: teachers did not talk about it, did not particularly worry about it, and displayed no special interest in it. Ignorance of the program, which seemed quite acceptable among teachers, came with the absence of that “sense of ownership” they had never developed. To them, the bold new concepts that SDSEP introduced sounded like the same old “buzzwords” from an impenetrable “jargon” — the sure sign of the pretentious, yet empty reform rhetoric that can be quietly ignored.

Misinformation was rampant: teachers did not know exactly what were the conditions of their “evaluative events,” could not tell which supervisory modes they were engaged in, did not remember what they had entered on their yearly plan, and often could not even find the plan itself. Yet life went on with little disruption, and the framers seemed to accept this state of affairs with contented resignation, assuming that the estimated 20% of teachers who were not “on board” — who did not fully understand or accept the motions through which they were being put — represented an acceptable margin of error. In fact, most people in the district felt in no position to “refuse” the program as a whole, and the passivity ingrained in the school culture alone would explain why 80% or more of the staff complied with whatever requirements were handed down.

For the framers to have equated such compliance with an active participation or understanding, however, reveals profound misconceptions about the culture of teachers in general, and of the Larkman schools in particular. It appears, then, that not only the possession of information, but the self-imposed obligation and responsibility to seek and find information were assumed to accompany power, which, as we discussed above, was now considered to be adequately distributed.

In conclusion, our analyses sketch out a picture of the professional according to SDSEP quite different from what teachers construed it to be. Interestingly enough, what the committee did was to endow the “professional” with the attributes of the “hero” as defined in narrative semiotics theory (Greimas & Courtès, 1982); which we can summon up here briefly to draw a revealing comparison.³

Reconstructing the Professional

This model distinguishes between two types of states which can characterize the hero, the *state of doing* and the *state of being*. Each state is predicated on two modal layers, reflecting ability and desire, which can be either imposed from the outside (*exotactic*) — “being-able-to” and “having-to” — or self-imposed (*endotactic*) — “knowing” and “wanting.” This modal structure is summarized in the chart below:

| Modalities | VIRTUALIZING | ACTUALIZING | REALIZING |
|------------|--------------|-----------------|-----------|
| EXOTACTIC | “having-to” | “being-able-to” | “doing” |
| ENDOTACTIC | “wanting” | “knowing” | “being” |

The implicit model of professionalism in SDSEP relied on endotactic modalities, a self-generated motivation (wanting) to take on responsibilities and exercise power constructively, supported by the appropriate knowledge. In other words, *being* a professional was the goal, not just acting like one. Since, however, most teachers lacked either or both the desire and the knowledge, only exotactic modalities obtained. That everyone in the district submitted to the procedures adequately enough was evidence of a state of *doing*, but certainly not of the state of *being* that SDSEP was seeking to foster; only the few “powerful” teachers had attained the status of self-directed “heroes.”

Aware of this discrepancy and of the cultural schism which caused it, we emphasized in our recommendations the need for a district-wide dialogue on the exact definition of “professionalism,” which we pointed out could actually serve as a starting point to draft a comprehensive constitution for the program. The very attempt to have all constituencies agree on one common definition of professionalism

³ This use of the term “hero” does not imply any positive judgment: it refers to a *subject*, i.e. any entity susceptible of action or knowledge. The hero may be good or bad, but s/he is characterized by self-consciousness and the exercise of free will.

would by itself bring all important issues to the fore, including the sense of *being* a professional (as opposed to following procedures), and the self-imposition of responsibilities as a counterpart to having power.

Indeed, the staff should probably have engaged in a common reflection on the very powerful arguments that have been formulated (e.g., Burbules & Densmore, 1991) against setting “professionalism” as an ideal or a goal for the improvement of teachers’ status. It would seem, however, that the professionalization of teaching has now been adopted as a credo by unions, in an effort to update their image, distance themselves from the world of labor, and shift “from a industrial-style teacher union to a post-industrial ‘United Mind Workers’.” (Chase, 1997).

The situation in Larkman showed that such good intentions may be at odds with “industrial-style” labor/management relations which change more slowly and less easily than evaluation plans. By promoting greater collegiality between administrators and teachers, and by involving teachers in their own professional development, SDSEP did seek to favor a more democratic process of decision-making; but its framers had taken for granted that such democratization was desirable in theory, and desired by all staff members who, if only given the chance, would turn into model citizens of this new republic.

The metaphor seemed particularly fitting: in many ways, the good citizen is similar to the professional we describe above: both are well-informed, capable of making judicious choices, and ready to accept and fulfill their responsibilities, as well as exercise their rights in a positive manner. As political events around the globe have amply demonstrated in the past few years, however, establishing democratic procedures can only work towards this goal if a democratic culture already exists, or at least if specific, concrete measures are taken to foster its development. In the Larkman School District, such a culture was still mostly shared by the handful of people who had been personally involved with the development of the Staff Development/Supervision/Evaluation Program.

Epilogue

The framers were utterly dismayed at the nature of our conclusions, which in essence had stated (1) that SDSEP had had minimal impact on the staff, (2) that it was generally not understood, and (3) that it was perceived as just another creation of the people in power. Their deception was all the more intense, as an obvious feeling of self-confidence had long ago permeated the project; although they knew that the program had met with some resistance among teachers and still needed some fine tuning, the original framers and committee members believed that SDSEP was essentially sound, and were confident enough about it to commission an external review.

However, we discovered that an internal reviewer had already submitted a rather scathing report on the committee’s practices and the effectiveness of the program. Much later on, we would realize that our own “impartial” research had been commissioned at least in part to supersede this incriminating document. Although we purposefully declined to read the document before completing our research, for fear that our data would be contaminated, we came to realize that our own report would have dire political implications as well.

After a fairly tense meeting where we had to defend and justify our conclusions to a mostly disbelieving committee (although two members did readily accept what we said), we were told that such a report would “kill” the program when it was shown to school board members, because it sounded so negative. We agreed to tone down the report on a purely linguistic basis, and submitted a second (final) version. The sense of disenfranchisement we had found in most teachers had prompted us to call emphatically for a broad and active dissemination of our report in order to start a district-wide conversation on the program.

Unfortunately, but certainly not unpredictably, the document was buried quietly.

This last episode — somewhat ironically — illustrates the fundamental cause of the program’s near-total failure: Good intentions and an intrinsically-sound program cannot compensate for the lack of a pre-existing professional and democratic culture. The committee members themselves demonstrated, in their reception of our report, that their own culture did not quite meet their own criteria for professionalism

and democracy. They mostly bemoaned the “negative” nature of our findings, instead of taking the opportunity to use this new information to inform their thinking about the SDSEP program. Moreover, they used their power to suppress the report, rather than disseminate it among all teachers and staff, as would have been done in a truly democratic culture. In blatant violation of the spirit of SDSEP, the teachers were never given a chance to examine the findings and form an opinion for themselves, as “professionals” are supposed to do, and as we pointedly suggested be done.

The case study of SDSEP ultimately confirmed that installing institutions of a democratic type and granting teachers the status of professionals cannot effectively induce substantive change. Without a fundamental shift in the culture, democracy remains merely an illusion.

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