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Power and the Role of the Superintendent

**Teresa Northern Miller,
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As schools move further into the 21st century, there is a strong need for education leaders and those who train them to prepare students for a future that is decidedly different from the past and to do so in a high stakes accountability environment. In meeting these challenges, school superintendents encounter politics in every arena (Hall & Hord, 2001) and constantly use a variety of types of power to accomplish their goals. These architects of both individual and organizational improvement must understand both the how and the why of leadership effectiveness (Reeves, 2006), and be able to appropriately apply the tools of power and influence. Leithwood, Aitken, and Jantzi (2006) identified a set of research-based practices for all leaders to use as part of school improvement efforts: set directions; develop people; develop the organization; and manage the instructional program. All of these practices involve the use of power. Successful leaders not only use of a variety of types of power in explicit and subtle manners, but they also recognize that stakeholder groups will use the same types of power on them.

As part of the Voices 3 project described in this issue's introduction, school leaders were asked to discuss actions they took in working toward three concepts: (1) school improvement; (2) development of democratic communities; and (3) social justice. As we analyzed the transcripts, we observed that multiple comments from superintendents indicated the use of power in working toward these concepts. We then analyzed superintendents' descriptions of their actions by superimposing on the transcripts a theoretically-driven model developed by French & Raven and later expanded by Andrews & Baird (as cited in Ambur, 2000)¹ to identify the types of power being used by and upon superintendents.

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Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

According to French and Raven, power is a relationship between two agents where one agent exerts power affecting the reactions of the other agent, and the use of power from various sources yields different consequences. Their earliest discussion identified five types of powers, and later work by Andrews and Baird added two more, for a total of seven:

- Reward power, related to positive reinforcement for behavior;
- Coercive power, related to ability to inflict punishment;
- Legitimate power, related to authority retained within a position;
- Referent power, related to respect and esteem given to individuals;
- Expert power, related to recognized expertise;
- Informational power, related to an ability to control the availability and accuracy of information;
- Connectional power, related to influence and support.

The research literature in educational administration has long been interested in the conceptualization and use of power. More recent research has documented a move away from more traditional types of power, validating the need to further examine the superintendency from the perspective of power. In 1996, Grogan predicted the administrative shift from top-down leadership to shared leadership and the subsequent changes in the use of power by superintendents. Brunner's later research (2000) affirmed the move to shared power in the superintendency and defined this change in the superintendent's role as "one that makes greater use of open questions, proactive listening, respectful, and caring treatment of others, a fuller honoring of multiple perspectives, a focus on social justice, and one that more accurately reflects the realities of the role" (p. 425). This shift in leadership responsibilities relates directly to superintendents' awareness and use of power, reflecting a move away from reward and coercive powers toward informational and connectional powers. Related to the move to shared power, Petersen and Short's research (2001) revealed that, "the superintendent's reputation and job survival was largely dependent on others' perceptions of his or her credibility, as well as his or her ability to influence critical policy decisions" (p. 553). Petersen and Short also found that superintendents who communicated a level of expert and referent power were better able to establish and develop collaborative stakeholder relationships that could serve to minimize opposition.

Loehr and Schwartz (as cited in Fullan, 2003) emphasized the importance of understanding the actions of leaders and the relationship to the types of power used by them and upon them: "Leaders are the stewards of organizational energy... They inspire or demoralize others first by how effectively they manage their own energy and next by how well they mobilize, focus, invest and renew the collective energy of those they lead" (p. 35). Reeves (2006) asserted that every decision leaders make, "from daily interactions with students to the most consequential policies at every level of government, will influence leadership and learning" (p. 180). Based on a need for more investigation regarding the use of power and influence by and upon superintendents, a qualitative analysis of power within the role of superintendents was conducted for this article using the focus group interview transcripts of the Voices 3 Project.

Methods and Data

This analysis was limited to the use of power on decisions and actions taken or experienced by these superintendents, as recorded in the transcripts. The authors recognized the complexity, richness, and vast amount of information contained in the focus group transcripts and chose the use of power because of its prominence in successful leadership. An analytic process reflecting common steps recommended by Creswell (2006) was used: Sketching ideas; taking notes; summarizing field notes; working with words; identifying codes; reducing codes to themes; counting frequency of codes; relating categories; relating categories to the analytic framework in the literature; creating a point of view; and displaying data.

The authors worked independently, first to read and review all transcripts and demographic information in order to provide tentative ideas, notes, and summaries of field notes. After initial individual reviews, they met frequently to establish consensus on definitions and examples for each initial coding category, to confirm consistency

in the coding, and to later determine patterns or themes across and within categories. After initial coding categories were established, each main category was analyzed using sub-codes to further reduce the data to meaningful findings for each of the sources of powers. Finally, the findings from each source of power were used to determine emerging themes that cut across coding categories. The section on findings provides the point of view and data displays for each of the seven types of power used in the initial coding categories, as shown in Table 1.

Findings

The findings for each source of power will be discussed first in this section, followed by the emerging themes, i.e., those understandings that cut across the categories or sources of power.

Table 1
Coding Chart: Type of Power, Definition, and Transcript Samples¹

Type of Power	Definition	Transcript Sample
Reward power	Uses positive reinforcement for behavior	...and just flat told them, "You're the most important group here because you're the first ones that any kids see." (Superintendent 58)
Coercive power	Uses ability to inflict punishment	You pay me more or I'm not doing it! (Superintendent 59)
Legitimate power	Uses authority retained within the position	...but we are the professionals that are charged with making the decisions that are in the best interests of our kids. (Superintendent 55)
Referent power	Uses respect and esteem given to individuals	We did a couple of additional things which we believe added quality things for our staff. The first one we dealt with, we embraced district-wide, the notion that kids and everyone else respond to dignity and respect. (Superintendent 55)
Expert power	Uses recognized expertise	I think if I've learned nothing else in all of my years in education, you've got to have that ability to step back one step and not get so... so involved emotionally that it deters the cause that you're supporting. (Superintendent 61)
Informational power	Uses ability to control the availability and accuracy of information	We have a right-wing Republican school board member, and he's for our referendum. Which is great. And, of course, we've run into a lot of fine articles about maintaining excellence. (Superintendent 72, medium-sized district, Midwest, 2005)
Connectional power	Uses influence and support	[A school-board member said] "You know, there is a listserv of three or four hundred people, a segment of our community that share/oppose issues about the school district or about education with one another." She said, "You might want to ask to get on that" (Superintendent 62)

¹ All quotes but the one on Informational Power are from a focus group with superintendents of medium-sized districts in the Midwest, 2006.

Reward Power

Reward power, or power related to positive reinforcement for behavior, did not surface in the transcripts as frequently as other types of power. Categories used to examine reward power included intrinsic rewards (internal and/or intangible) and extrinsic rewards (external and/or tangible). Extrinsic rewards were more typically referenced in superintendents' conversations, and the effects of rewards were most often associated with teachers or staff rather than other stakeholders, such as students or parents. Superintendents also mentioned trying unsuccessfully to use reward power, as in this example:

We have after-school programs and we ask teachers now to spend time after school and they are so busy with their day that when they go in there- and then you try to offer 15 to 20 dollars an hour- they will come right back and say, "You know, I just can't do it." (Superintendent 50, medium-sized district, Midwest, 2006)

Coercive Power

Superintendents' told of several instances when coercive power, i.e., the ability to inflict punishment, was used on them under provisions of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*, compelling them to take certain actions with staff and students out of fear of sanctions. *NCLB* requirements were described with mixed tones—sometimes positively and sometimes negatively, depending upon whether superintendents thought they were in the best interests of students. When superintendents described coercive power being used against them by stakeholder groups like parents, boards, and community patrons, it was described negatively. Superintendents, however, did describe choosing to use coercive power related to *NCLB* to make changes they felt in the best interests of students, such as requiring teachers to alter teaching strategies, counseling ineffective teachers out of the classroom, and taking disciplinary actions against both staff and students. These actions were coded as discretionary use of coercive power. The positive and negative tone designations in Table 2 reflect superintendents' perceptions as drawn from their conversations.

Table 2
Uses of Coercive Power

Groups Involved	Action Description	Positive Tone (+)	Negative Tone (-)	Compelled Use of Coercive Power	Discretionary Use of Coercive Power
Superintendents	Meet all state/federal requirements	+	-	X	X
	Force students to make tough choices about academic options		-	X	
	Require staff to become experts in everything		-	X	
	Focus dollars on unfunded mandates not on what's best for students		-	X	
	Use to counsel employees out of teaching, reassign, or hire new employees	+	-		X
	Use to get needed results for student success	+		X	X
	Take disciplinary action with staff to address changes required by <i>NCLB</i> accountability	+		X	X
	Used power of <i>NCLB</i> to make change building-wide	+		X	X
Staff	Negotiate contract restrictions		-		X
Board	Rescind superintendent decisions		-		X
Parents and/or community members	Used to sway and/or change board or superintendent decisions		-		X
State/ <i>NCLB</i>	Design sanctions for not making adequate yearly progress		-	X	

Legitimate Power

Legitimate power is related to the authority retained within a position. Several superintendents' comments referred to actions related to their job responsibilities, such as finance, personnel, management, and maintenance. One superintendent mentioned feeling overwhelmed by being responsible for everything and by the need to be visible everywhere in the community. As superintendents described their responsibilities, their actions were coded as use of legitimate power in either positive or negative ways (tone), based on the context of the conversations. Typically, when superintendents agreed that the action was best for students, their comments reflected a positive tone; when they felt the actions were required by their job, but did not reflect what was best for students, the tone was negative. Superintendents described actions negatively when stakeholder groups (staff, board members, parents and/or community members, regulatory groups) used legitimate power against their decisions. Table 3 illustrates the uses for legitimate power.

Referent Power

Referent power is related to respect and esteem given to individuals. Examples of the use of referent power were infrequent in the

transcripts and when found were similar to descriptions for legitimate and expert power. Only actions that specifically related to esteem or respect were coded as examples of referent power, as in a comment by superintendent 55, "We embraced district-wide the notion that kids and everyone else respond to dignity and respect" (medium-sized district, Midwest, 2006).

On the other hand, there were multiple statements regarding the lack of referent power. Superintendent 56 described the following situation:

I feel really bad about the fact that the profession is getting bashed. And particularly—It just wears on me some that on a daily basis, we're out there doing these things to work with staff, facilitate the communication, do what's best for kids, on and on. And there are some folks that don't think we're worth a darn. It's really frustrating right now. (medium-sized district, Midwest, 2006)

In addition, one superintendent described unsuccessful efforts in seeking referent power from his board of education members, and another spoke of similar lack of referent power with the teachers' association.

Table 3
Use of Legitimate Power

Stakeholder Group	Compelled Use of Legitimate Power	Positive Tone (+)	Negative Tone (-)
Superintendents	Make land transfers, refocus curriculum, reassign staff and students	+	-
	Manage operations, financial and maintenance issues, provide the resources, the training, the support, the vision, the passion, to get things done- be responsible for everything	+	-
School Boards	Set agendas and address curriculum	+	
State/Federal Requirements	Meet adequate yearly progress requirements		-
Stakeholder Group	Discretionary use of Legitimate Power	Positive Tone (+)	Negative Tone (-)
Superintendents	Outline all the expectations for every child (and teacher) and hold the line		-
School Boards	Charged with making the decisions that are in the best interest of our kids- the right things for the right reasons	+	
	Legitimately block everything		-
	Do not stand up for superintendent decisions		-
Parents	Challenge board or superintendent decisions		-
Community	Challenge board or superintendent decisions		-

Expert Power

Expert power is related to recognized expertise. Actions related to expert power and legitimate power were difficult to distinguish from each other and were very much related to the nature of shouldering responsibilities, or as an effort to gain credibility or referent power. As the superintendents described actions, the authors coded those related to recognized expertise as expert power. These actions were then categorized by standards from the ISLLC Standards for School Leaders (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), 1996), widely recognized for their application to school leadership. (See Table 4). In addition, many superintendents mentioned actions that matched the definitions for other types of power, used at the same time, such as referent power in the act of seeking informational power; or they mentioned using the coercive power of *NCLB* to force others to seek informational power through data collection. They then disseminated the results, which aligned with connectional power.

Informational Power

Four categories of informational power emerged from superintendent comments involving the use of informational power:

- Matters related to professional development;
- Make decisions for school improvement;
- Inform others inside district outside district;
- Collect data

Categories were further broken down by general settings in which actions occurred and the broad purposes (or outcomes) superintendents were seeking from the action. The categories, settings, and purposes are listed in Table 5. Superintendents often made use of informational power across all categories in settings related to *NCLB*. *NCLB* was credited with increasing the use of data (information) in making decisions related to improving student achievement and there were indications that the decision-making process had become more data-driven.

Table 4
Uses of Expert Power

ISLLC Standard	Action Taken	Powers Used or Accessed
I. A Vision for Learning	Innovations, reform and use of technology	Used expert power with coercive power and legitimate power
	Vision-setting	Used expert power with coercive power
II. A Culture for Learning	Meeting <i>NCLB</i> requirements related to student performance	Used expert power and legitimate power with coercive power of <i>NCLB</i>
	Curriculum choices/best practices	Used expert power and legitimate power with coercive power
	Evaluation of programs and staff	Used expert power with informational power
III. Management for Learning	Problem-solving	Accessed expert power of other groups
	Finding ways to train and save money, making the most of resources available	Used financial expert power with legitimate power and informational power (and could sometimes gain referent power)
	Maintenance and transportation	Used expert power of other groups to guide decisions
	Delegation and monitoring	Accessed expert power of other groups and then used legitimate power for monitoring
IV. Community for Learning	Leading groups– teachers, board, community, principals	Used expert power with legitimate power and referent power
V. Ethics for Learning	Student advocacy	Used expert power to gain referent power by doing what's best for students
	Legal issues	Used own legal expert power to gain referent power
VI. Larger Context for Learning	Community communication	Used expert power to increase informational power, gaining connectional power as a result

Table 5
Uses of Informational Power

Categories	Setting in which Action Occurred	Purpose for Using the Information
Matters Related to Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working with data related to <i>NCLB</i> Working with data from other sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving skills for self, staff, board, parents
Make Decisions for School Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decisions related to <i>NCLB</i> compliance Decisions related to improving performance in areas beyond <i>NCLB</i> at all school levels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whole school academic improvement District-wide academic improvement Improved performance of individual students or groups across grades and district levels
Inform Others Inside District Outside District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working with staff, board, parents, students Working with community patrons, elected officials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To counter misinformation from newspapers, rumors, Internet, other sources To problem solve To explain decisions To make decisions
Collect Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working with Staff (including teachers) Working with parents, students Working with <i>NCLB</i> requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To problem solve To make school improvement decisions To inform others To listen and respond to constituents To assess personal effectiveness

Connectional Power

Connectional power was the power most frequently involved in actions superintendents mentioned. Seven general categories emerged related to the use of connectional power:

- School improvement work;
- Problem solving;
- Support of the democratic process, e.g., giving everyone a voice;
- Changing/influencing the opinion of others;
- Listening for input, maintaining visibility;
- Professional development activities for self, staff, board of education or parents;
- Goal setting.

These connections were made with six identifiable groups: boards of education; community outside school; staff, including teachers; students and parents; other districts and superintendents; and elected officials. The settings of the connections were coded as having a positive (+) tone, a negative (-) tone, or a neutral (nt) tone, as shown in Table 6.

The most frequently mentioned purposes for using connectional power were school improvement work and problem solving. A noticeable number of comments described either broad general actions for the purpose of engaging all stakeholders (coded as supporting the concept of democratic community), or influencing/changing others' opinions. Other purposes mentioned less often included listening to constituents to acquire input; activities related to professional development; and goal setting for the organization.

Superintendents mentioned connections with individuals and groups both inside and outside the district almost equally. Connections inside the district most frequently mentioned were staff and students or school populations (including parents). Superintendents indicated using connectional power most frequently for purposes of collaboration with others as opposed to exerting pressure, or promoting positions. Out-of-district connections were made to collaborate, problem solve, or to network with peers for support. Connections for professional development activities were for the benefit of staff, boards of education, teachers, or self. School improvement connections included efforts with teachers, parents, students, the community, and other districts..

Overall, the settings involving the use of connectional power for any purpose were more positive in tone than negative, and all groups were represented in the positive tone contexts. Negative tone connections were limited to groups or individuals outside the district. There were no negative tone ratings for setting goals, listening for input, or professional development activities. With very few exceptions, connections in order to support school improvement were positive. While both negative and positive tones were found for all purposes, the greatest number of negative ratings involved solving problems, such as budget issues, hiring, or discipline hearings; and changing or influencing someone's opinion, such as promoting bond issues or advocating for resources.

Superintendent comments describing actions in general support of the democratic process were more positive than negative in tone and occurred both inside and outside the district, as exemplified by this superintendent quote:

Table 6
Use of Connectional Power

Purpose for Use of Connectional Power*	School Board	Community Outside School	Other Districts or Superintendents	Elected Officials	Students and Parents	Staff
School improvement work (Setting tones: +12, -2, Nt11)		X	X		X	X
Problem solving usually involving budget issues, student hearings (Setting tones: +5, -6, Nt12)	X	X	X	X	X	X
Actions related to carrying out a democratic process– giving everyone a voice (Setting tones: +5, -2, Nt9)	X	X			X	X
Influence/change others' opinions, pass bond issues, advocate for resources (Setting tones: +2, -5, Nt8)	X	X		X	X	X
Listen for input, be visible in the school or community (Setting tones: +6, -0, Nt5)	X	X	X		X	X
Professional development activities for self, staff, board (Setting tones: +5, -0, Nt3)	X					X
Set goals for the district (Setting tones: +2, -0, Nt1)		X			X	

* Note. The settings of the connections were coded as having a positive (+) tone, a negative (-) tone, or a neutral (Nt) tone. Tone Totals: +37, -15, Nt 49.

And, as I tell folks, you know, when you say “You gotta keep kids,” first and foremost, “kids” is an all-inclusive statement and I’m not sure we’ve always approached that as an all-inclusive statement. That means all of our children. And so, that’s been a really– a neat opportunity for me to work with. (medium-sized district, 2006)

Emerging Themes

After the authors analyzed the transcripts by each power individually, they then discussed the interaction between the powers and the three concepts of the Voices 3 project (school improvement, social justice, and democratic community). This process yielded five emerging themes with regard to superintendents’ use of power:

- Shift toward shared leadership and community building.

The use of some powers appeared more frequently than others and for different purposes than might have been expected. Reward power and referent power actions were coded infrequently and usually in relationship to other powers. Informational and connectional power actions were coded most frequently. Connectional power was used not to force a solution, but to gather information and work with stakeholder groups to develop solutions. The increased use of informational and connectional powers affirms the shift from top-down leadership toward shared leadership and community building mentioned by Grogan (1996) and Brunner (2000).

- Blending the use of types of power.

Superintendents demonstrated a tendency to combine powers to influence decisions or actions. Legitimate power, for example, would often be used in combination with reward power. The superintendent would insist on a particular change or action but follow that directive with a reward in the form of additional compensation, recognition, or support for the change. Superintendents also described blending the coercive power of *NCLB* with the legitimate power of their position to make changes that needed to be made for the shared vision of what was best for students. Some superintendents shared examples of using legitimate power, expert power, and informational power to gain referent power. Often, stronger connectional power resulted from the use of other powers. This blending of powers relates to effective leaders knowing how and when to use specific types of power to accomplish their goals (Reeves, 2006).

- Politics and the use of different types of power.

Superintendents both exerted and were influenced by various types of power. Superintendents exerted coercive, legitimate, expert, informational, and connectional powers to meet the requirements for *NCLB*. When stakeholder groups exerted legitimate power against them, superintendents’ decisions were impacted, such as having their decisions overturned by their boards or having a student suspension appealed and/or changed through a parent’s actions. These situations demonstrate Hall and Hord’s (2001) warnings regarding politics in every arena.

- NCLB mandates and the sometimes reluctant use of power.

The concept of power related to the Voices 3 concepts surfaced most often in comments about actions related to school improvement. The impact of *NCLB* requirements were mentioned often, as those requirements forced superintendents to make changes in curriculum, scheduling, instructional strategies, and personnel. These changes were viewed both positively and negatively. Some were felt to be unfair and not what was best for students (social justice). Other changes were seen as positive when *NCLB* gave them the power to make changes they felt were needed such as removing an ineffective staff member or changing to a more effective curriculum. Superintendents' interest in working toward a democratic community was demonstrated by their frequent mention of actions using informational and connectional powers. Their efforts related to changing curriculum, schedules, instructional strategies, and personnel are directly linked to Leithwood, Aitken and Jantzi's (2006) concepts of setting directions, developing the people, developing the organization and managing the instructional program.

- When not to exert power.

A fifth theme that emerged was the superintendents' comments about their lack of power or influence to do what they believed needed to be accomplished. Superintendents mentioned needing to "back away and not get so emotionally involved" (Superintendent 61, medium-sized district, date unknown) when their expertise was not valued.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

Conclusions

Historically, the role of the superintendent in effective schools, as related to the use or influence of power, has not been well defined. Podsakoff and Shriesheim (1985), using the French and Raven types of power, discovered problems in several previous studies and found it difficult to make any firm conclusions about the uses of the types of power. Subsequently, several studies of the superintendency have made references to the uses of power as well as documented the changes in the ways superintendents use power and have power used upon them by stakeholder groups (Ambur, 2000; Bruins, 1999; Brunner, 2002; Brunner & Grogan, 2005; Harris, Lowery & Hopson, 2004; Katz, 2005; Peterson & Short, 2001).

This study of the superintendent focus group interviews from Voices 3 adds to the research base with regard to the range and nature of the types of power experienced or used by superintendents. Using the French & Raven/ Andrews & Baird model of seven types of power, the authors analyzed superintendents' self-described interactions with others in the school district, community, and beyond. Several superintendents' comments described a search to gain credibility, or referent power although they did so by using other types of power. In order to make changes superintendents believed were needed, they found they had to use coercive power and, less often, reward power. They described using legitimate or expert power to make changes that they believed were in the best interests of students, but they also mentioned that they felt their experience or expertise was not always respected by stakeholder groups. Superintendents accessed existing data to gain informational power and then connected with their stakeholder groups to make decisions, which could result in increased referent power. Referent power appeared hard to use effectively without the use of other powers.

Out of the authors' analysis emerged five themes with regard to superintendents' use of power in relationship to the goals of the Voices 3 project--school improvement, social justice, and democratic community:

- First was a shift towards greater use of shared leadership and community building by superintendents.
- Second, superintendents have become more cognizant of blending two or more types of power to achieve their goals.
- Third, superintendents realized that the "politics" of school districts and communities required them to use different types of power in different situations; and conversely, they understood that they would be on the receiving end of the uses of power by stakeholders.
- Fourth, the necessary use of power to carry out mandates like *NCLB* sometimes left superintendents feeling conflicted because they did not feel the mandates were not in the best interest of students.
- Fifth, superintendents found they needed to know when it was not effective to try to exert power.

Recommendations for Future Research

The dynamics and impact of the current high stakes accountability environment related to *NCLB* and the impact of increasingly harsh sanctions should be further studied given the recurring comments by superintendents that they felt a lack of legitimate or referent power.. Future research should also explore the influence of sanctions-based legislation like *NCLB* on superintendents' ability to use reward power and the extent to which the threat or reality of sanctions has resulted in increased use of coercive power by superintendents. An unexpected finding in the study was the extent to which experiences that shaped beliefs and actions of superintendents acquired prior to assuming the superintendency appeared often within focus group conversations and appeared to have a direct impact upon their later actions. Further research is warranted to determine how pre-existing beliefs influence superintendents' use of power after they move into the superintendency.

The findings from this study point to the need for future studies of superintendents' actions which reflect changes in the work environment since the initiation of *NCLB* in 2001. This early analysis reflects the changing nature of the superintendency as well as the movement toward more collaborative community building based on knowledge and instruction. This change in the nature of the superintendency is a subject worthy of further investigation. Our results also suggest a need to pursue research into the roles and actions of current superintendents, in order to close the gap between a past vision of school leadership (top-down) and the current vision (more connected to stakeholders) needed for school leaders to be both effective and successful in the 21st Century with all stakeholder groups.

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Endnote

¹ Subsequent reference to French & Raven and Andrews & Baird in this article are also secondary references found in Ambur (2000).