

Who Has Power in a School?

Purpose: To help people see that virtually everyone has some power and to convey the basic nonviolent understanding of power – that power comes from the obedience of others, and that there are various kinds of sources of power.

Handouts: Power Taster Sheet

Facilitation notes: Preface the exercise by asking people for a definition of power. You are likely to get phrases such as ‘control of others’, ‘the ability to have an effect’, ‘making things happen’. Some people make the distinction between ‘power over’ (domination or threats) and ‘power with’ (cooperation) or collaboration). Explain that this exercise is about understanding ‘power over’ so that social change groups can identify effective application of their ‘power with’, namely their ability to have a positive impact on the world.

Description: Ask people to idea shower all the people or groups who have power in a school. You will quickly get a list of pretty well everyone involved. If an important group or person is missing (Secretary of State/caretaker), you can add it yourself. Ideally this is done on a two flip-charts so that you can write the people on one sheet and the source of power on the other. If working on one sheet, leave enough room between names to add in the source of power.

Next ask them why 'X' has power? Where does the power come from? What is its source? Why do people do what 'X' says? Time usually doesn't permit to do this for the whole list, but make sure you cover the head, the pupils, the caretaker, the school secretary, parents and Secretary of State. This will give a good range of sources. Capture participants responses in a different coloured pen.

The third stage is a facilitated discussion about power in general. Capture participants main points in a third colour. Try to draw out the core point of this exercise which is that the power of some comes from the obedience of others. People in position of authority and power have gained that position because consciously or subconsciously others have given their own power over to them.

N.B.: Teachers, quite understandably, and others may want to talk about the specifics of school life at greater length than is helpful, which can skew things. You may have to be fairly firm to keep the exercise on track. Power is a huge subject and the discussion can wander around in ways that are interesting but don't produce the desired result, so be prepared to keep bringing people back to the main points.