

## **Insights from Peter Drucker: Education as Power to Realize Power**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This essay argues that the main challenge for the next education is to prepare students to recognize and use power to create meaningful changes for the benefit of society. This essay draws insights from the works and life of Peter Drucker and includes my experiences and reflections.

### **The Real Problem is Inevitable**

The most pressing issue that we have in our world is power, not its presence, but the fact that it causes harm when it falls into unprepared hands. Even Peter Drucker himself recognized that human nature is weak to resist the temptations of power, so he emphasized discussions about it in his works about management (Shao, 2020).

Power is defined as the “ability to act or produce an effect” or a “possession of control, authority, or influence over others” (Merriam-Webster, 2024). In this essay, I argue that power is inevitable, and that education should prepare the next generation to be aware of the realities of society, to challenge inequities and oppression, and to utilize power to uplift the lives of people.

As a social worker, I have seen how power can be instrumental oppressing people. When I was a student intern during a post-disaster situation, power revealed itself to me in the most heartbreaking way. We met people who lost their loved ones and everything they have worked hard for in a single event. We had the opportunity to interact with them and I noticed that some houses were being restored while others were left destroyed. I asked about the differences that I noticed, and the community members responded, “*Those with roofs are allies of the administration, and those without roofs belong to the other party.*” I was shocked and speechless. I asked myself, “*How can politics prevail in such situation when people are grieving and starving?*”

Power became even more evident when I started practicing social work as a profession. I worked with persons who use substances undergoing treatment. The political context in my country is aggressive towards such population. The Human Rights Watch (undated) reported that thousands of urban poor Filipinos were killed during the “war on drugs” and that evidence was altered to justify extrajudicial killings. I have seen how the wrong use of power can put a high price on social justice that is unaffordable to the marginalized and vulnerable sectors of society.

Those little kids in the classrooms will hold power someday. They are our future doctors, teachers, managers, government officials and citizens. They will lead this world that we will leave someday. How do we prepare them?

## **Education as Power to Bridge Students and Social Realities**

When we were in the classroom studying social work, we were taught about politics and power relations and how these things can influence our profession. It was clearly explained by our professors, but it is only when I came face-to-face with it that it finally dawned on me—power is really a serious matter.

Power is everywhere and we encounter it daily. But how often do we talk about it? In roundtable discussions or even a simple family dinner or gathering with friends, when does power take the spotlight? At what age, do we get introduced to it? For me, I was 18 when I first engaged in a critical discussion about power. I have known the term all my life, but it was only during that time that an adult, my professor, talked with us about it.

The question boils down to “how can education prepare the next generation to face power?” Peter Drucker might have the answer to this. He said, *“I hope we will expose youngsters much earlier to work experience outside of the school as part of their growing up, because we keep them segregated much too long. This deprives and denies them knowledge of the general society”* (Drucker and Ellner, 1976). Drucker understood that if we want our young people to be prepared for the world, they must get to know it. The key is to gradually introduce them to the realities they will live with for the rest of their lives.

Bringing students closer to society is an important function of education. Peter Drucker believed that our future leaders should understand their accountability to the communities and their responsibility to serve the common good (Reckmann, 2023). He understood that while our students are developing as individuals, they also need to recognize themselves as part of a larger ecosystem.

## **Education is Power That Needs to be Realized**

In the previous section, it was argued that education should prepare students to face realities such as power by integrating them into it. The next argument emphasizes on education as power itself that influences people’s lives.

Knowledge is power. Peter Drucker said, “the basic economic resource- the means of production- is no longer capital, nor natural resources, nor labor. It is and will be knowledge.” Education reproduces knowledge; therefore, education is power.

For education to make a difference, it must first understand itself as a form of power. In the beginning of this essay, we defined power as the “ability to act or produce an effect” or a “possession of control, authority, or influence over others” (Merriam-Webster, 2024). Indeed, educational institutions influence people in different ways, and I can attest to that. Education has always been a significant part of my life. For instance, when I was in primary school, I was taught to treat our teachers as our secondary parents, hence, I believed recognized them as authority figures in my life. I spent most of my days in school. My interactions with my teachers and other staff, and with my classmates shaped me as a person.

I was 13 when I got my first scholarship. I topped my class for the first time and fortunately, my school offered a full scholarship that year. I did not come from a well-off family, so it helped us a lot and I realized that I had to do well in school to do well in life. My life

depended on my academic achievements and most days I chose to lock myself in my room to study. I would say I became selfish because I saw my classmates as my competitors. My focus was to become the best student. My desire was to use my knowledge to obtain wealth.

When I was in college, I had a shift of career from economics to social work. I was taught to not only live for myself but also to live for and with others. I learned that life is not about competing; it is about collaborating. I did not see my classmates as my competitors, rather they were my partners in learning. I still had my personal goals, but the desire to use my knowledge to help others changed my life course. At present, I am completing my postgraduate social work degree in Europe. I am working on advocating for the rights of persons who use substances.

Education has pushed me to leave my life in the Philippines and to adjust in a foreign land. More than that, throughout my life, education served as the power to influence me to use my knowledge for a good purpose—to contribute to positive change. The education system needs to realize that they have great power because the knowledge and values they impart to students are also what students impart to the world—the people they work with, the organization they serve, and our general society.

### **Education as Power to Touch People**

I started this essay with a negative discussion about power and how I witnessed the harmful use of it to oppress people. But believe it or not, I have also seen the other side of the coin—how power can uplift and help us. And here I argue that education should use itself as a power to touch people and create more meaning out of life. What do I mean by that? Allow me to share with you a reflection from my childhood which opened my eyes to realize what I wanted to be.

I was born and raised in a coastal community where many people are poor and do not have access to formal education and healthcare. My grandmother served as the rural health physician in that community for many years. I would visit her small clinic when I was young, and I saw the need of the people. She would always remind me of the significance of helping others. She taught me that healthcare is a human right.

My grandmother had power as a rural health physician. I did not understand it until I became older. She had the knowledge as a doctor, so her patients believed her. Her touch had power for it helped in diagnosing a situation or implementing an intervention. She had power over me as a grandmother so watching her made an impact on me.

When I was in first grade, I learned about the different professionals like doctors and what they do in school, but my grandmother showed me how to be one. I learned theories in school, but realities gave me meaning. I saw how my grandmother performed her duty with honor, compassion, and integrity. It molded me into becoming the social worker that I am today.

Peter Drucker said, *“What are theories? Nothing. The only thing that matters is how you touch people. Have I given anyone insight? That’s what I want to have done. Insight lasts; theories don’t. And even insight decays into small details, which is how it should be. A few details that have meaning in one’s life are important”* (Rao, 2021). Drucker did not only say the statement above, but he also made it evident in his life. He may be physically gone but his

insights remain and continue to inspire and lead us toward creating meaningful changes in our present society. I lost my grandmother last year, but she touched my heart in a way that it transcended even death. Her insights remain in me and just like how she used her power to touch others, I am using mine to make a difference in other people's lives.

### **The Next Education: What Needs to be Changed?**

Peter Drucker once said, "*Knowledge has to be improved, challenged and increased constantly, or it vanishes*" (Rao, 2021). It is a reminder that if education wants to be relevant to our changing society, some things need to be changed.

In the earlier parts of this essay, we have established some important arguments. It is argued that the main challenge for the education system is unpreparedness for power, and that the education system needs to recognize itself as power, to bring students closer to social realities, and to influence learners to use their power for a good purpose. If these are what should be done, how should education change to achieve them? Of course, it is always easier said than done. But here are some suggestions that we can learn from Peter Drucker to support our educational institutions in doing so:

1. Practice and Promote Diversity in Cultivating Students' Strengths and in Incentivizing Different Kinds of Intelligence

Peter Drucker taught us that cultivating students' strengths is the goal of teaching (Rosenstein, 2022). But in doing so, educational institutions should employ different methods in harnessing different strengths. This is possible through practicing diversity in schools. For instance, some students may find it more effective to learn with a small group than to learn alone or in a big group. Some students may learn more quickly when listening to an audiotext than when reading it. Some may be musically inclined while some are masters of numbers. Educational institutions should be prepared to attend to a wide range of strengths to respond to students' needs and to offer an individualized teaching and learning experience that can bring out the best in them.

Educational institutions should also incentivize different kinds of intelligence. When I was young, I would always receive awards because of academic excellence. During my time, students who scored the highest in exams would always get the best recognition. But why don't we incentivize and recognize students with good listening skills? Why don't we give scholarships to students who bring democracy and peace in their classrooms because of their excellent leadership skills? Maybe these things are not happening yet because we are limited to a few or certain kinds of intelligence. Diversity is needed so that most, if not all students, will feel included.

Peter Drucker said, "*The reason why schools are so dull is that they try to impose uniformity on everything, and that is always dull. Nothing is duller than uniformity*" (Drucker and Ellner, 1976). If schools will be limited to certain strengths and types of intelligence, it may ignore and discourage students with unique abilities. Diversity can be the key to mold students not to fit into society, but to become the best versions of themselves to uphold society.

## 2. Practice and Promote Power Sharing

Drucker promotes healthy balance such as balance between “the specific mission of individual organizations and the common good” or between “freedom and responsibility” (Drucker Institute, 2006). Balance is achievable if power is shared and not concentrated on say, few individuals. In an organization, decision-making should be shared with its members so that responsibility and accountability is also shared.

Power sharing may not be natural for us humans because our tendency is to acquire more of it, but I believe that power sharing can be learned, and schools can play a significant role in doing so. For example, schools can serve as role models in power sharing by involving students or even their parents and guardians as co-creators of learning. During my time as a student, we would already have a syllabus prepared for the semester. The teachers were the only ones deciding what to teach and how to teach it. But if schools are going to apply power sharing, they can provide opportunities or platforms for students to co-design topics or activities with teachers that may be relevant to the objectives of the course. Schools can also celebrate a “students as teachers” week wherein students function as teachers to promote them as co-creators of knowledge. Drucker once told us that the best way to develop individuals is to train them as teachers (Rosenstein, 2022). It is also possible that some of their parents or guardians are in the fields of sciences, music and arts, languages, or other fields and they can contribute as co-creators of the curriculum. If students and their guardians will serve as co-creators, there may be more ownership of the learning process. If students will experience power sharing and collaboration at an early age, they may develop the habit of doing it and continue doing it once they assume the role of being leaders in their chosen fields.

## 3. Immersion—Living like others

Just like what was discussed in the early part of this essay, Peter Drucker reminds us that young people should be exposed outside of the school to understand society (Drucker and Ellner, 1976). Through immersion and experiencing how to “live like others,” students may understand social realities not from their perspectives but through the lenses of other people. For example, rice has been a huge part of the culture that I grew up with as a Filipina. But I was already 18 when I met farmers and live with them for a few days. I learned that they bring food to our table, but sometimes, they are the ones who are starving.

Schools can provide opportunities to immerse students in social realities. They can invite those people who may not be experts in the academe but are experts in life. For instance, a factory worker can be invited to talk about how they manage their finances as minimum-wage earners. This way, we bring students closer to realities and we can show them how to honor all kinds of workers. This way, we can help them realize that work brings not only economic but also human and social value to society, just like how Peter Drucker taught us (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2017). And maybe someday, when they become managers or leaders, they will see people in the workplace not as workers but as their fellow human being.

## **CONCLUSION**

Power is inevitable. Power is either good or bad, depending on how it will be used. Education must use its power to help students in realizing their own power, and to help the generations of today and tomorrow.

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