The Nature of Power:

Focus Question: Is Power Good or Bad?

In any group of people—whether it is your classroom, your sports team, or your circle of friends—some people have more power than others. One definition of power is the ability to achieve what you want. Within a group, power can be defined as the ability to get others to do what you want. There are many reasons why one person is more powerful than others. These include greater intelligence, persuasiveness, charisma, money, physical strength, attractiveness, and social status.

Power is a natural part of being human. We use it every day. We can use power to achieve personal and shared goals. We can also use power to deny certain people or groups equal opportunities to meet their needs and wants. This misuse of power can lead to discrimination and inequalities. Power can be very destructive in the wrong hands, but it can also be constructive if it is used to promote equality and improve lives.

Types of Power

There are many types of power that operate within our society and in the larger global community. Military power can be used for both good and evil ends. Political power and influence can be used positively or negatively. Corporate power can be used to benefit consumers and employees or to promote greed and overcharging. In a democracy, the voters and consumers ultimately judge how well elected leaders and large corporations use their power to satisfy the voter and the buyer.

Influence

People are constantly trying to influence politicians to do certain things. Interest groups will exert influence on decision makers— sometimes for the public interest, sometimes for private gain. If power is used responsibly, most people in a democratic society will benefit.

Stop and Consider:

Consider the following scenarios. Write briefly how power is used in five of these scenarios. In which scenarios is power being used in a forceful way? In which scenarios is power being used in a persuasive way? In which scenarios is power based on rewards?

1. A mother insists that her children go to bed by 8:00 P.M. or they will lose their television privileges.
2. A student persuades the class to stop buying hamburgers at a certain restaurant because the extra packaging used by the restaurant is harming the environment.
3. You know that if you speak out against the government leader, you will “disappear.”
4. You purchase a brand of running shoes that is endorsed by a major sports figure.
5. After watching pre-election TV ads for several weeks, you vote for a political party.
6. Your parents give you extra money for the “A’s” on your report card.
7. After an earthquake, looters are imprisoned without trial.