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POWER

Why read this text ...

The concept of power is often understood and studied as the ability or the right, allotted by societal consensus to a group or individual to make decisions that affect the members of the society. From a systemic perspective, power is seen as the ways society imposes institutionalized constraints on individual agency. From an actor-oriented perspective, power relates to the ability of individuals to influence the choices and decisions made by others. Power relations are thus not static, but inherently multidirectional aspects of all social relations.

In the context of education, power can be associated with formal and informal institutional structures, and the individuals that represent them. In this regard, the concept of power is useful for describing the ways these structures affect how administrative staff, teachers and students choose to act or not act. For instance, while teachers and administrative staff hold institutional authority and power, students very often and even quite easily find ways to subvert this power and exert their own power, whether directly or tacitly, in ways that shape the learning environment. In a culturally diverse school environment, cultural difference may operate as a source of empowerment or disempowerment among teachers, students and their peers.

Historical Context

Anthropologists have explored relations of power in a great variety of ways, ranging from physical domination to symbolic empowerment. In Weber's understanding, power 'is the ability to enforce one's own will on others' behaviour' (1978 [1919]), in other words, the ability to make someone do something they otherwise would not have done. Systemic or structural power, as defined by Marxian approaches, can be found in the division of labour, the legislative system and other structural features of society. Practically, all humans have some potential power or influence. However, this resource is unequally distributed and always context dependent (Eriksen 2001:157-175).

Sociocultural anthropology has studied aspects of power in various forms of social organization (non-state and state societies) and within both hierarchical and egalitarian social relations. Colonialism has heavily influenced anthropological conceptualizations of power and power relations between nations, groups, and individuals (Morton 1967). Anthropologists have analyzed how power is claimed and contested, and how forms of domination are asserted through the use of language, ritual, and force, and how these also are resisted. They have also examined bureaucratic power in state societies and the perpetuation of institutional authority, as well as the different systems through which power is legitimized, enforced, and contested (Niezen 2018).

Gramsci's (1968), notion of hegemony, understood as a totalizing power in which the state and/or a popular majority dominates by every means, has provided anthropologists with a way of thinking about pervasive institutionalized power. The concept of hegemony helps us think about the strategies by which the ideologies or world-views of powerful social groups

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are both maintained and transformed. Moreover, hegemony can be understood in terms of the ways states govern large numbers of people through their institutional apparatus and control – ideologically, socially, and physically – those citizens who oppose state actions. A reverse but inter-dependent aspect of power is the state of powerlessness. James Scott has coined the term resistance (1985) in an effort to illustrate how the seemingly powerless and marginalized often develop their own strategies – so-called “weapons of the weak” - to increase their control over their own existence.

Pierre Bourdieu (1977) has described power as the force that produces and guides everyday practices. To manifest the symbolic expressions of power, Bourdieu introduced the notion of cultural capital as a resource and tool for exercising domination. Cultural capital comprises a variety of habits, such as linguistic ability, art preferences, education, and awareness of political issues. According to Bourdieu, those who possess the most cultural capital are the ones to define and impose the social norms.

Another prominent social theorist of power, Foucault (2000), viewed power as produced and reproduced from many different positions, through ongoing social interaction. He stressed that power is productive and enabling, circulating through all levels of society and within all social relationships. He associated power with knowledge and regarded all knowledge as inseparable from regimes and technologies of power and discipline. In this Foucauldian view, schools are sites of disciplinary technologies that produce certain subjectivities. The Panopticon, commonly associated with Foucault, is a metaphor for a particular disciplinary power, a continuous, anonymous and all-pervading surveillance operating at all levels of social organization.

a) Discussion

In schools and other educational institutions numerous conflicts arise in relation to administrative roles, instructional methods, classroom organization, curriculum, etc. (Burbules, 1986: 111). Importantly, interaction between teacher and students reveal the power relations at play in the classroom and how power is exercised in the course of educational processes (Jackson 1990). Teachers are often faced with making decisions about how to use their power in ways that are beneficial to both themselves and students. Effective teaching is often related to successful classroom management, and the strategies teachers deploy to ‘control’ students (Plax et al., 1986). In practice, strategies of control may backfire, resulting in various forms of student resistance, creative non-compliance or aggressive disruption. As such teachers may be cautious about how they wield their pedagogical authority and look for ways of encouraging students to express their opinions about everyday classroom issues. Sullivan (2002:2) notes that creating empowering conditions can facilitate students in accomplishing their need for *with* peers or the teacher rather a power *over* them. Such empowerment installs a sense of responsibility in students, stems from the teacher’s trust, but also a sense of belonging and connection with classmates (Kirk et. al 2016). According to Ken Macrorie (1970), students’ personal development and empowerment is a result teachers’ empowerment.

b) Practical Example



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In a study of teachers' and student's perceptions of daily life in the classroom, Anne Sullivan (2002) examined the implementation of practices of student empowerment in a primary classroom. Visiting the class on a daily basis for about five weeks, Sullivan followed a teacher who encouraged social interaction to help students pursue their goals of developing social relationships. The aim was to establish and maintain a close peer culture among classmates. The author contrasts this with the example of another teacher who primarily focused on his own teaching.

Sullivan argues that enabling students to pursue social relationships is an important process of intrapersonal empowerment. She observed that levels of interpersonal empowerment varied as power relationships among students changed over time. *"For example, levels of empowerment varied when students adopted roles and responsibilities, such as Person of the Day, because with the role, they assumed a position of power thus gaining power-over peers. Some students were more empowered than others because they were ready to become that empowered or they had the necessary skills. In addition, students perceived that some of their peers had power, because for example they were popular, and thus those peers had power-over those who held the perceptions. Therefore, levels of interpersonal empowerment seemed to vary due to roles students assumed"* (Sullivan, 2002: 8). Sullivan concludes that student empowerment is a fluid procedure. Students with social skills that helped them gain 'power-to' in one aspect of their life did not always have skills in another area (which for example?).

Thinking further:

- How are power relations manifested in educational practices and what effects do they have on these?
- How can teachers motivate students to pursue certain goals?
- What strategies might they follow to empower their students?

KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES

Hegemony, empowerment, resistance, powerlessness, discipline, person and society, cultural capital.

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