LEARNER EMPOWERMENT: THE CASE FOR TEACHERS DEPLOYING DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

This paper is centred on how 5th grade teachers in schools in Cali, Colombia (Latin America) exercise power and authority in their classrooms. Findings from a multi-case study draw out the challenges and the complexity of cultivating democratic climates in primary school classrooms, and how teachers conceive of, and deploy, their power and authority through a range of mechanisms. This includes evangelical and heteronormative discourses, and authoritarianism and punitive discipline management, which do not support democratic classroom climates. In contrast, the study also sheds light on markedly different teacher practices based on the deployment of democratic leadership. This type of leadership, arguably rare, presents teachers substituting dialogue for dominance; cooperation and collegiality for hierarchy; and active learning and problem solving for passivity. In doing so, teachers succeed in constructing democratic classroom climates and spaces that enable learner empowerment.

Keywords: Democratic leadership, learner empowerment, teachers.

1. Introduction

At a convoluted juncture and increasing challenges stemming from multiple global dynamics – forced migration, economic instability, wars, violences, famines, energy and water shortages, a climate crisis, a mental health crisis with more persons of all ages suffering from anxiety and depression, and rising inequalities to name a few – what happens in schools and classrooms acquires particular importance. These challenges are direct or indirectly tied to democracy, and in particular to the relationship between democracy and education. This relationship becomes particularly significant when schools have been described as having the same social functions as prisons as well as institutions for those who are mentally challenged and require some form of treatment. These social functions include defining, classifying, controlling, and regulating people. This begs the question, do schools and classrooms also perform these "social" functions? If so, how? What are the immediate, but also broader implications, of this modus operandi in an increasingly fragile and polarised world?

As a researcher of Southeast Asian descent who at the time had been working in private universities in Colombia for eleven years, mostly serving students from upper middle- and upper-income groups, I embarked on exploring school and classroom life in marginalized neighbourhoods in Cali. Cali is the capital of the Valle del Cauca department and one of three major cities in Colombia. While this was an opportunity to take distance from the privileged settings I had taught in, and better understand the complex and vastly diverse Colombian educational system, the study undertaken focused on 5th grade classroom teachers: how did they conceive "democracy", "citizenship" and "education"? How did they make sense of their own teaching practices? Were their conceptions aligned to their classroom practices? Were they promoting or inhibiting *student voice*? *Decision-making capacity*? *Equality of respect and recognition*? *Equality of power*? *Critical thinking*? These features (italicised), not exhaustive but critical, were identified as some of the distinctive features of democratic citizenship education. This particular paper stems from part of the data that shed light on how teachers conceive of power and authority (in particular their own power and authority), and how they deployed these in their classrooms through their practices. This is closely connected to a nascent exploration of how (a) teachers exercise leadership, and (b) if, and how, democratic forms of leadership may contribute to not only academic but also social, emotional, and civic development.

Admittedly, this paper raises a number of questions and does not provide definitive answers, partly due to the sheer complexity of thinking about teachers deploying democratic forms of leadership in school structures that are usually overly rigid, hierarchical, and authoritarian; and partly due to not wanting to fall into the trap of ignoring that each cultural context demands its own set of answers, and not prescriptive and simplistic answers from the "outside". Those with-*in* the respective context and culture may be best situated to reflect on possible paths to consider, and deploy, democratic leadership in their respective teaching and learning processes *if* this perspective and course of action is deemed of value.

Nonetheless, some of the questions that this paper reflects on are the following: if schools and classrooms are social and political sites, to what extent do they reflect societies and nations at large? Assuming they do reflect societies and nations at large, to what extent can they be social microcosms and spaces in their own right that counter those dynamics that are undemocratic - or that at the very least weaken the social (and political) fabric of societies? Is it unrealistic for schools and classrooms to make a substantive effort to cultivate democratically skilled and disposed learners? If so, how would this be done? What is the role (if any) of primary schooling to begin to cultivate persons who contribute to democratically robust, socially just, multiracial societies? What practices may teachers deliberately, and intentionally, adopt to accomplish this, and how? Should educational systems address the cultivation of democratically skilled and disposed learners holistically, and not atomistically? Would this require considering a learning continuum of some sort where primary, secondary, and tertiary education are not isolated parts but subsystems of a larger machinery or project that contributes to robust democracies?

2. Power: What is it, and what does it have to do with democratic leadership?

How to democratize school relations inevitably intersects with the notion of power. Power et al. (1989) and Power & Higgins-D'Alessandro (2008) contend that organizational climates like a classroom climate, shape individual perceptions and social behaviour. Narvaez (2010) refers to the specific role played by educators within these organizational climates, pointing to educators' capacity to foster good intuitions, promoting mastery learning, prosocial relationships, and citizenship development (Narvaez, 2010). Teachers then are vital socialization agents within the educational spaces they work in, socializing and exposing learners to ideas, languages, behaviours, and ways of thinking, acting, and feeling. In this sense, the classroom as a social learning space becomes a research setting to explore teachers´ leadership styles; and particularly if, and how, they deploy democratic leadership through conceptions of power.

Power is at play in many forms in the educational domain including through curricula, assessment, pedagogy, and teacher-student interactions. Lynch & Baker (2005) add that these forms - manifested in both subtle and explicit ways - are embedded within processes of exclusion, marginalization, trivialization, misrepresentation, and I would add subordination. These forms often overlap with, and equate to, a lack of respect and recognition that some groups in particular, experience through status-related inequalities relating to age, sexuality, religious beliefs, disability, language, gender, class, race, or ethnicity.

The need to democratize school relations for no other reason than because of its intrinsic educational value is foundational to cultivating democratically skilled and disposed learners. Moreover, the above forms in which power is adversely at play provides additional reasons for considering deploying democratic leadership. A basic, yet useful, point of departure may be acknowledging how power has emerged from a purely static entity - possessed by some and exercised over others – to one that is fluid, dynamic, relational, situated, circulated, endlessly negotiated, and constructed (Bahou, 2011). Janeway (1980) underscores the dynamic nature of power, amidst ceaseless shifts and tensions, thrusts and responses, hope, and frustration, and by practical outcomes that derive from compromises and confrontations. Manke (2008) acknowledges how power can operate both centrally and peripherally, potentially leading to conflict:

> "*I imagine students and teachers as building rooms or spaces in which they can interact independently or influence the actions of others, building areas off to the side of the main structure where they can live and work without conflict with others, and sometimes seeking to build in areas where their plans and actions conflict with those of other members*" (p. 6).

Power disposed within a democratic leadership style is particularly challenging. While it is not explicitly visible or observable, power has profound egalitarian implications. Waller (1932) refers to how children are defenceless "against the machinery with which the adult world is able to enforce its decisions: the result of the battle [between teachers and students] is foreordained" (in Manke, 2008, p. 1). Bartolomé (1994) refers to how school personnel uncritically, and unknowingly, hold the deficit view of minority students – particularly in reference to students who have been historically oppressed and whose

academic achievement has been questioned. This points to asymmetrical power relations reproduced in schools and classrooms as an important, yet less visible, reason for their performance.

Relating to asymmetrical power relations, Starhawk (1988) distinguishes between three types of power: (1) "power over", which refers to a hierarchical relation of domination and control; (2) "power-from-within", referring to one's sense of personal ability and deep connectedness with other human beings and the environment; and (3) "power with", which suggests influence in a group of equals. For De los Reyes and Gozemba (2002), the power to influence rests on having the skills, dispositions, and knowledge to cultivate the "power-from-within" and the "power with" through dialogue and alliances between teacher and students (and among students).

How power is conceived and exercised is at the heart of teachers deploying democratic leadership. Teacher practices and their interactions with children can be framed within a capacity-based, a deficit-based, or a combination of both, perspectives. The capacity-based perspective may open possibilities for the exercise of democratic leadership, emphasizing 'working with' students and creating opportunities for them to become aware of, and appreciate, their "power-from-within". A deficit-based perspective is contrary to the exercise of a democratic leadership, emphasizing 'doing to' or 'doing for' students.

3. Methods

Thematic analysis was conducted in a qualitative multi-case study to explore teachers´ conceptions and practices relating to democracy and education. This paper specifically focuses on their conceptions of power in an attempt to make sense of their leadership styles. The multi-case study method allowed drawing out the complexity and diversity of cultivating democratic or other, more authoritarian, or negligent leadership styles. Cohen et al. (2005) describe contexts as unique and dynamic, and case studies serve to "investigate and report the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships and other factors in a unique instance" (p. 181).

Two main instruments were used to collect data: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. A student questionnaire was also used at the onset of the study to get a sense of students´ perceptions regarding their respective teacher's practices in the classroom. This questionnaire was then used to obtain scores relating to how democratic teacher practices were based on student perceptions. The questionnaire also sought to identify classrooms characterized by particularly strong, average, and weak, democratic climates. Two of the classrooms selected scored high, two scored low, and one scored average. This paper focuses on one of the five classrooms, where the teacher deployed democratic leadership that seemed to stem from a radical conception of democracy.

Both the questionnaire and the classroom observation matrix employed were inspired by two instruments: the DCCED (Democratic Climate of Civic Education Classroom Scale), designed by Mappiasse (2006), and CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System, Upper Elementary) designed by Pianta et al. (2012). CLASS is a scoring system empirically tested across large samples of standardized observations in preschool and elementary classrooms. Both the DCCED and CLASS were used as guidelines to identify behavioural markers to make sense of teacher practices. In the broader study, classroom observations and semi-structured interviews focused on making sense of teachers´ practices relating to participation, equality, and critical thinking. However, this paper focuses on what some of these practices reveal on teachers´ conceptions of power. It also seeks to better understand the implications of deploying democratic leadership in the 5th grade classroom in schools in marginalized neighbourhoods in the city of Cali. While the study was undertaken in Colombia, it has implications for considering deploying democratic forms of leadership in other contexts, cultures, and countries.

4. Results

This section refers to a specific event in one of the 5th grade classrooms observed in the broader study: a student asks the teacher for her permission to go to the bathroom, to which the teacher replies, "My love, I don't control your bladder" (In Spanish, "Mi amor, yo no controlo tu vejiga"). Weeks later, I interview this teacher, seeking to make sense of her conception of power and possible implications on her leadership style. Based on the event observed in the classroom, I ask the teacher what "control" means to her. I also ask her, "where does control reside in your classroom?" I deliberately use the word "control" – and not "power" to make use of the same word and idea she used in replying to her student when the latter asked her for permission to go to the bathroom. The teacher´s response is as follows:

> Teacher: *The thing is, I believe that this is part of democracy, and I would believe that it is part of critical thinking. It seems to me that in a society, that in a school environment... where I have to tell an adult who is there as an authority, that I have to ask permission to go urinate, to go to defecate, to go to expel what is*

> *inside my body that is suffocating me at that moment, when I have a full bladder, my intestine; It seems humiliating to me. And then how come I want to form critical thinking, but I have to humiliate myself in front of an adult who must ask permission to go to the bathroom? For me it is humiliating, and how to do it, how to make me have free thought, that I can strive for freedom of thought when I have to ask permission even for the most basic thing, which is going to the bathroom.*

The teacher, in explaining the event, also adds what she relates the classroom event to (i.e., a student asking her for permission to go to the bathroom):

> Teacher: *I do not understand it; when a child does this to me* [asks for permission to go to the bathroom], *I think of a movie I saw called "maids and ladies", which was during the time when in the United States black ladies worked in white people's homes. So the* [white] *lady would count the sheets of toilet paper that she gave her* [the black maid] *who as an employee had a separate toilet outside. So that seemed so humiliating to me and I always take that to my classroom. Having to ask permission for you to go to the bathroom seems humiliating to me. And then how do I form* [support the development of] *free-thinking people who can decide… because critical thinking is related to the decisions that I make for my life... when I have been subjected by power to the point that someone else decides for me? When they ask me for permission, I tell them: my love, I can't control your bladder.*

The teacher adds the following:

> Teacher: *What I try to make him* [the student] *understand are two things: at that moment, you have a desire to go to the bathroom, and at that moment you have an assignment, an assigned task; At that moment, with your thoughts, choose in a second what is most important at that moment and if there is something that cannot wait. I can hold on for a moment and finish the task, or I can't hold on and the task can wait, because my health is at stake. That is what I meant.*

5. Discussion

The response of a teacher to her student, "my love, I don't control your bladder", in a 5th grade classroom when asked for permission to go to the bathroom, denotes a conception of power within a larger conception of democracy. First, the teacher believes that physiological needs are, and ought to be, self-controlled and self-regulated. Second, the teacher thinks that being in a position where she as the teacher decides if a student can go to the bathroom is a form of control that represses students´ agency. Also, from the teacher´s perspective, it does not help cultivate democracy and critical thinking. The fact that the teacher associates a student asking for her permission to go to the bathroom with the racial inequality and segregation of the 60s in the U.S, is interesting: both events, albeit distinct, share the common feature of exerting forms of control over others, regulating their actions, while repressing their own self-regulation, freedom of movement, autonomy, and in essence, their decision-making capacity. This can happen, and happens, in a classroom setting within a larger institutional school structure as well as at a broader societal level. Both settings, in their own ways and terms, denote forms of control – *not* forms of democratic leadership.

The teacher´s conception of power emerges from how she explains what "control" is as described in relation to her interaction with her 5th grade learners. Her conception of control inherently relates to her conception of power. Within these conceptions there are at least four discourses at play: first, employing control as a way of nullifying one's sense of self-respect and one's dignity as a human being; second, seeing control *over* a student as the absence of democracy insofar as one's own decision-making is overridden by others deciding for them; third, conceiving control as absence of critical thinking; fourth, equating the use of control as the absence of free thinking and freedom of thought.

What is also interesting is how the statement the teacher uses to reply to her student when the latter asks to be given permission to go to the bathroom - "My love, I *don´t* control your bladder" – becomes "My love, I *can´t* control your bladder" during the subsequent interview held between the researcher and the teacher weeks later. The implications of realising one´s limitations as the teacher in the classroom vis a vis her students and acknowledging them in the way she does, opens spaces to not only recognise the physical presence of students: it enables learners´ cognitive and emotional capacities for agency and self-regulation. Learners are entrusted and empowered to take control and responsibility of their learning in a proactive manner, and not through coerced and coercive mechanisms.

6. Conclusions

The teacher whose practices are discussed in this paper are based on her conceptions. Both conceptions and practices seem to be aligned, creating conditions, structures, and spaces (physically and psychologically) where students are encouraged to think freely and critically whilst self-regulating and

exercising autonomy. These practices challenge a schooling system that has served dominant social institutions that are not only largely hierarchical and authoritarian but also homophobic, racist, and that continue to perpetuate inequalities (Nanwani, 2023). The way in which power is deployed by the teacher through her practices is a form of democratic leadership within the complex microcosm of classrooms.

Democratic forms of leadership create opportunities for classrooms and schools to become political sites of social reform – and not social reproduction. In essence, democratic leadership may serve to not only teaching and learning *about* democracy but teaching and learning *in* democracy; stated differently, it opens spaces to teach democracy democratically.

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