Gaps in Theory and Practice of Power Dynamics in Education

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Abstract

Power is complex and omnipresent. Not only is it a visible part of daily life, but its presence as a social construct can be seen in a variety of disciplines. Dahl (1957) states that despite power's focus as a variable of analysis since antiquity, our understanding of it is far from complete. Power is often thought of as something possessed and there in lays the tendency to view it as something tangible. However, we see that even this conception of the tangible aspect of power is debated upon. In the context of education this theme is pertinent because; the concept of power is one of the factors that determines the organizational culture, and in turn, the success of any educational system. The paper is divided into two sections; firstly to share some empirical findings on existing organizational cultures as perceived by teachers of educational institutions and to look at some of the perceptions of power that teachers have constructed for themselves. Secondly, the paper is a beginning of a discussion on the need to look at the concept of power in education and relook at theories to see how power can be used for the betterment of our educational institutions. The need for this paper emerges from the author's personal experiences and sharing the belief of Michele Foucault that power also has a productive dimension. It contributes to individual's self making and prevalent in any relation and finally power always can be contested.

Keywords*: Power, organizational culture, education*

Introduction

Numerous social scientists have identified the concept of power as being an indispensable construct needed for the understanding of human interactions (Adams, 1975; Bierstedt, 1950; Blau, 1964; Cartright, 1959a; Clark, 1965; Dahl, 1957; Gamson,1968; Lane, 1963; Lasswell & Kaplan, 1950; Tedeschi, 1972; Fiske, 2010), but what is actually meant by the term can vary depending upon the intent of the researcher. Those who have negative connotations of power often view it in terms of being solely aggressive and ultimately coercive in its use (Fried, 1967; Lasswell & Kaplan, 1950; Stotland, 1959). Others have

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sought to look at power in terms of willfulness an overcoming of resistance to get another to do something they wouldn't choose to do otherwise (Etzioni, 1968; Mechanic, 1962; Minton, 1972; Weber, 1947/1964). Some researchers study power in terms of influence tactics (Aguinis & Adams, 1998; Ansari & Kapoor, 1987; Fu & Yukl, 2000; Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980; Schriesheim & Hinken, 1990; Schmidt & Kipnis, 1984; Yukl & Falbe, 1990; Yukl & Tracey, 1992) while others have focused on examining types or forms of power (Astley & Zajac, 1991; French & Raven, 1959; Parker, Dipboye, & Jackson, 1995). The author would like to use the concept of 'power' as given by *Michele Foucault (1976)* in M. Foucault's View on Power Relation. Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was equally a philosopher, a psychologist and a historian. The power problem is central to his thinking regarding the relations between society, individuals,

groups and institutions. The fundamental idea emerging from all his works is that the privileged place to observe the power in action is in the relations between the individual and the society, especially its institutions. Consequently, Foucault studies in what he calls "the analysis of power" how various institutions exert their power on groups and individuals, and how the latter affirm their own identity and resistance to the effects. Foucault thinks that it is wrong to consider power as something that the institutions possess and use oppressively against individuals and groups, so he tries to move the analysis one step beyond viewing power as the plain oppression of the powerless by the powerful, aiming to examine how it operates in day to day interactions between people and institutions. In the first volume of "*Histoire de la sexualité*" he argues that we must overcome the idea that power is oppression, because – even in their most radical form – oppressive

measures are not just repression and censorship, but they are also productive, causing new behaviors to emerge. As opposed to most marxist thinkers, Foucault is concerned less with the oppressive aspect of power, but more with the resistance of those the power is exerted upon. For example, the Marxist thinker Louis Althusser studied mainly how people are oppressed by the state institutions and how they build themselves as individuals through the mystifying action of the ideology. Even as most philosophical and sociological discussions look and study power from the sociological and ideological point of view, educational institutions as social institutions are not spared from power and conflict issues. The author here would like to put down certain understandings that the author has adopted for the usage of the word power based on Foucault's writings on power.

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Concept of Power

This way of understanding power has two key features: a) power is a system, a network of relations encompassing the whole society, rather than a relation between the oppressed and the oppressor; b) individuals are not just the objects of power, but they are the *locus* where the power and the resistance to it are exerted. Mark G.E. Kelly thinks that these features can be further nuanced. In his opinion, Foucault's view of power, as presented in *Surveilleretpunir. Naissance de la prison,* involves the following features: 1. The impersonality, or subjectlessness, of power, meaning that it is not guided by the will of individual subjects; 2. The relationality of power, meaning that power is always a case of power *relations* between people, as opposed to a quantum possessed by people; 3. The decentredness of power, meaning that it is not concentrated on a single individual or class; 4. The multidirectionality of power, meaning that it does not flow only from the

more to the less powerful, but rather "comes from below," even if it is nevertheless 'nonegalitarian'; 5. The *strategic* nature of power, meaning that it hasa dynamic of its own, is intentional. Together with these, says Kelly, other features can be identified but they are not present in the cited work, but in *Histoire de la sexualité*: power is coexistent with resistance, it is productive i.e., it causes positive effects, and it is ubiquitous i.e., it can be found in any type of relation between the members of society, being a possible condition for any relation.

Section 1: Knowing the Organizational Cultures of Educational Institutions

In the study the researchers (Sharma & Thomas, 2012) studied what type of culture exists and is preferred in S.S.C, C.B.S.E and I.C.S.E board schools of Mumbai with respect to the dimensions of organizational culture- Power culture, Role culture, Achievement culture and Support culture.

Organisational Culture: Organisational culture is the set of values, belief, principles and goals which the teacher abides, for the smooth running of the organisation. Organisation cultures focus is based on four dimensions, namely power, role, achievement and support.

- **Power dimension**: Describes an organisational culture that is based on inequality of access to resources. It has a single source of power from which rays of influence spread throughout the organisation. This means that power is centralised and organisational members are connected to the centre by functional and specialist strings.

- **Role dimension**: This type of culture focuses mainly on job description and specialisation. In other words, work is controlled by procedures and rules that underlie the job description, which is more important

than the person who fills the position.

- **Achievement dimension**: This often refers to a task culture, which entails organisational members focusing on realising the set purpose and goals of the organisation. The main strategic objective of this culture is to bring the right people together, in order to achieve the organisational goals.

- **Support dimension**: Describes an organisational climate that is based on mutual trust between the individual and the organisation. A support-oriented organisation exists solely for the individuals who comprise it, and may be represented diagrammatically as a cluster in which no individual dominates.

The sample comprised of 570 secondary school teachers from Mumbai of S.S.C, C.B.S.E and I.C.S.E boards. Research instrument was the Organisational culture

scale (OCS) prepared by Harrison and Stokes (1992). According to Harrison (1993: 27) the reliabilities of the four dimensions of the organisational culture questionnaire, calculated by the Spearman-Brown formula, are for achievement (0.86), power (0.90), role (0.64) and support (0.87). The overall reliability of the questionnaire is 0.85 (Harrison 1993).

Conclusion: It was found that in the S.S.C board mean existing culture scores, power culture is 48.9, role culture is 37.3, achievement culture is 28.8 and support culture is 34.9. Therefore, we can conclude that **Powe**r culture is prevailing in S.S.C board. In S.S.C board schools, the preferred organizational culture mean scores of power culture is 27.5, role culture is 33.8, achievement culture is 40.3 and support culture is 48.2. Therefore, we can conclude that in S.S.C board teachers prefer **Support and Achievement Culture**. This study was

followed by interviews that were taken from 25 school teachers. The open ended interviews were then coded using the protocol coding technique, where pre determined codes were used to understand the data. To arrive at these themes the researcher coded data in keeping with the themes for understanding power as given by Kelly De-Moll (2010). **Position, Control, Respect, and Distance** was the broad themes used to analyze data. The data constantly spoke about power resting in the hands of a few in their institutions. Usually, the people who were 'big' exerted a power. There was always a hierarchical relationship where people who were 'big' were powerful and others were said to be subordinates. People in position of power was said to enjoy greater control by virtue of their position. Control or ability to modify own behavior too was ascribed to another person and usually to the person enjoying a position that was greater or above their own. The

theme of respect deals with the presence or absence of authentic caring within a hierarchical relationship. Positive experiences of power yielded a portrait of respect that was colored by reciprocity of opinion, concern and an acknowledgment of each other's humanity. Participants often discuss that those with respect really listened to them or invested time in them. Thoughtfulness is involved. *Some participants' description of her parents illustrates how respect is given to those who, likewise, show respect.* Many participants expressed that very often people in positions superior to their own most often lose respect and control due to overstepping their authority. *My principal even tries to discuss my family and character with other colleagues. My principal tries to influence the minds of other people in the field in a negative manner against me.* Despite the overall lack of respect that is displayed by their superiors, participants acknowledges

that their place in the hierarchy alone demands that they show, at least, some respect on the surface of their relationships. *Like doing work assigned to them, not returning a verbal abuse with a verbal abuse etc.* This is also due to the fact that people in power are always placed at a **Psychological Distance** from the rest of the people. Even though they may have a position that is respected and regarded, most of the participants did express that people "higher" up were considered to enjoy a position that was not considered to be very accessible. Only matters that were relevant and not waste their time were discussed with them. There were also examples of conversations that showed that participants maintained a deliberate distance due to lack of trust. *I do not interact much with my Principal or Head because I know she/he would not maintain confidentiality. I keep my Principal at a safe distance because I*

feel that she/he would use my own words against me.

Implications of the Research Findings:

Studies in the area of power in educational institutions have mainly concentrated on what kind of power exists in educational institutions and how is power culture in institutions related to other variables such as stress, effectiveness etc.? However little effort has been put in order to see how this power impacts individuals? Though this study too brings about the negative aspects of misuse of power, but it is this study that has initiated the process of revisiting theoretical understandings of the ubiquitous concept of power.

There are two strands of thought that run across the researcher's mind. *Firstly,* there is a need to reaffirm the views of various philosophers that power relations exists and will always exist in any social relation. Therefore, what should education and educationists strive for in the area of

human relationships in organizations? And what are our epistemological beliefs of power in educational organizations?

Our curriculum attempts to lead us to propagate a classless society that strives to respect individual freedom and we discuss philosophers who say that subjectivation is a formative power of the self. We refer to Foucault's view on power of thought, which he says is the ability of human beings to problematize the conditions under which they live. On the other hand we have cultures in educational institutions which are oppressive. Many writings have emphasized on the dark side of power. This may be due to the inappropriate use and understanding of power. History has only endorsed philosophical claims that power helps to bring about a change in individual personalities and self control in the net work of relationships present in society. What kind of power has been exercised in our educational institutions and what changes

has it brought about in people experiencing power. These are some of the questions that we in education need to address. *Secondly*, researches need to address and asses and share some of the practices in educational institutes where the basic tenets of humanistic practices in educational institutions have been practiced by educational managers. We need studies that show and bring out the amount of respect shown by power holders to their 'subordinates', we need to study the believed and actual distance of power holders from 'subordinates' in educational spaces. We need to start discussing and seeing relationships between epistemological beliefs of knowledge and power and how does that percolate to our inter-personal relationships in educational spaces.

Section 2: Concluding with the Need for Building Educational Systems Where

Power is Shared by Thoughtful Reflection:

Michele Foucault (1976) elucidated the link between power and knowledge. He saw knowledge as systematized ways of thinking about the world that develop over time into norms that become controlling, socially legitimized, and institutionalized (Appignanesi & Garrantt, 1995).For Foucault, knowledge and power were fundamentally dependent upon each other (p.83). Foucault riled against views of power that posited it as centralized and ultimately coercive. In his conceptualizations (1976; 1980) power was viewed as something that"…is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth" (p. 98). As stated earlier in the paper, power was thought to exist as a result of discourse. Foucault analyses the relations between individuals and society without assuming that the individual is powerless compared to institutions, groups or the state. Power is seen as a more volatile, unstable element, which can be always contested, so power relations must be permanently renewed and reaffirmed.

What implications do these views of Foucault have for education when we look at education as a system of relationships, as well as when we look at education as a means of social change? When we look at education from the perspective of a system of relationships, research tells us that power is conceptualized as a single source of power from which rays of influence spread throughout the organization. It is based on inequality (Fried, 1967; Lasswell & Kaplan, 1950; Stotland, 1959).Such conception of power has contributed to discontentment among employees. Foucault and other philosophers opine that power is unstable and can be contested. Then what do we ascribe these discrepancies to? Is it the inability of individual teachers to contest

power and change cultures that are coercive? Do we teach in our classrooms in a manner in which we empower ourselves and our students to develop abilities to critique the system in which they are? We refer to Foucault's view on power of thought, which he says is the ability of human beings to problematize the conditions under which they live. Do we really have the conviction that the power of thought surpasses every form of knowledge? If so, do we ignite and develop capacities to look at our current positions and content from a critical framework? Do we critique the dominant banking model of education and adopt the democratic problem based model of education as given by Paulo Freire in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Paulo Freire's voice of concern still calls out to us to look at the way we in education are programming the individuals; especially the disadvantaged to accept their current positions in the social spaces that they are in. In our relations in educational institutions are we really 'classless'? Or are we propagating a hierarchy in social relations between heads of institutions/principals and teachers; teachers and students? The classification can go on. The researcher here is mindful of the fact that when we talk of empowering every member of the organization to have a share in power structures the kind of empowerment would vary, the kind of roles each would play too would vary. Every individual would also have to ask themselves the pertinent question of whether they are able to handle power at whatever level they are in an organization?

Although Freire has been embraced by many societies, sadly our educational institutions areinformed by the positivistic and management models.Sofor beginning the process of change, we need to begin with the understanding that power is not a commodity, it is by nature decentralized. It is volatile, never static and can always be

contested. However, what we need is a consciousness of the nature of power and know that even in the situations where power is coercive, we as individuals can use power for our own self regulation and development.

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