Teacher-Student Discourses, Power Brokerage and Classroom Engagement

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Abstract

This paper examines power brokerage between prospective teachers and students in Social Studies classes in Trinidad and Tobago.Six diverse secondary school classrooms were observed over a school year. In each class, power-lines were drawn based on student perceptions of in-situ authority, knowledge, challenge and interest power. Students appeared to base their interactions and willingness to be academically engaged on their perception of the ability of the teacher to manage the bases of power related to the same four factors. There also appeared to be a hierarchical structure emerging from these observations with authority power at the top followed by knowledge and then challenge or interest power at the lower levels. Generally, classroom discourses were most successful when prospective teachers adeptly wielded knowledge or challenge power and less successful when employing authority power. Interestpowerappeared to be moderately effective. The implications of these findings for prospective and cooperating teachers are also discussed.

Keywords: classroom interactions, power brokerage, perception of social class ideation and academic engagement

1. Introduction/Literature Review

Change in any sphere of life is never without specific challenges. The present movement in education that seeks to bring students to the center of the teaching-learning processes is a case in point. Of particular note in the new educational paradigm is the articulation of power in the classroom. Specifically, who wields this power? Howis it wielded? and, what is its potential for shifting among players or being undermined?In this vein, Quicke (1999) argues that it is imperative for education professionals to critically examine the "role of power in the construction" of themselves as professionals and "their stance towards their own expertise" (p. 51). Quicke (1999) also posits that school improvement mechanisms fail, in part, because of a lack of understanding of the way *power systems* are constructed within the formal and informal systems of teacher and student practice that constitute a school's culture. On this matter, Piro (2008) advances Foucault's view that "perhaps more than any other social institution, schools create a regime of power by defining norms."

From Foucault's perspective, classroom discourses between teachers and students represent global and administrative power located at the classroom level in the form of 'micro-powers' (Quicke, 1999, p.60). Piro (2008) also argues that one of Foucault's more popular ideas was that of a discourse of power mediated through language (p. 39). In other words, Foucault argues that in order to understand how power works, we have to look closely at the *power discourses and relations* in institutions such as schools, universities and hospitals (Piro, 2008).According to his theory, *disciplinary* power is concerned with creating individuals who conform to the expectations of a body of knowledge and norms of that society or the immediate context in which those individuals are embedded (Piro, 2008).

Relatedly, power in this study is defined as the potential of teachers and sometimes students to take the lead in subject-referent discourse that creates a pathway to meaningful academic engagement or contrariwise to divert interest or attention away from meaningful academic engagement (Larkin, 1975).

Power articulated in this way creates an interesting dilemma for prospective teachers who are new to the classroom or to a particular group of students. These prospective teachers often worry about offending the students by holding the reins of power too tightly or demonstrating an inability to 'control' their charges (re: classroom management competencies) by holding the reins too loosely. This dilemma relates to Foucault's idea of the tendency to use power to "confine" (Piro, 2008, p. 41).

In many instances, prospective teachers waver between both extremes, sometimes with some success, other times their classrooms descend into chaos and confusion. Thus, the paradigm shift in education away from the traditional authoritarian teacher-centered classrooms to a student-centered orientation is by no means an easy one for either teachers or students when it comes to the articulation of *in situ* power. This articulation of power in a real sense reflects the "plural and conflictual nature of school" (Quicke, 1999, p.64). In this paper, an argument based on reflection is made for four possible manifestations of power in the classroom. These power articulations are identified as authority, knowledge, challenge and interest power and are individually discussed below.

1.1 Authority Power

Authority power is the power that teachers wield in the classroom by virtue of being the individual with the overall ability to dispense rewards or sanctions according to students' behavior, conformity and compliance (Larkin, 1975). Foucault refers to this as sovereign power which in the school context might be combined with disciplinary power (Piro, 2008). Thus, power in the classroom might be seen to be doubled if the class teacher (i.e. the sovereign power) also holds a dual role as a dean of discipline (executing disciplinary power) for the said class or form level. Thus, authority power, as articulated here, represents a confluence of *coercive, reward* and *legitimate* power referenced in previous literature (e.g. Payne & Cangemi, 1998).

1.2 Knowledge Power

Knowledge power is seen as the ability of the teacher to show intellectual prowess or her subject domain competencies as an expert practitioner. Knowledge power is also referred to as information or expert power where the teacher is expected to be head and shoulders above all (Payne & Cangemi, 1998). This might be manifested in the teacher's ability to answer difficult questions, surmount subject specific challenges posed by students and access future learning in a coordinated and easy manner without errors or sidestepping. Foucault, in his discourse on power, views *power* thus employed as justified because it is deemed critical, from a pedagogical standpoint, for learning to occur (Quicke, 1999).

1.3 Challenge Power

Challenge power represents the ability of the teacher to present and facilitate challenges that are appropriate for her students. This goes beyond the ability to present students with challenging material and enters a realm where *the challenge is a challenge* because of the way it is articulated by the teacher. For example, a teacher may teach a Math, Science or English Language lesson then give students worksheets with questions or problems that might challenge them. In this case, the challenge is inherent in the material and has little to do with the teacher himself/herself. However, when a teacher personally affects the motivational base of her students by articulating the challenge in a deliberate and specific way in the flow of instruction and not as an add-on activity- challenge power is demonstrated. Consider these two approaches: Math teacher A instructs a class, then simply asks the students to complete an exercise that follows the lesson in the textbook. Math teacher B teaches the same lesson then presents questions of varying degrees of difficulty explaining that level one is simple, level two is difficult, and level three very difficult.

This simple articulation of the different levels of questions sets a particular frame of reference in the classroom and students would now want to see where their level of competence is and have a desire to reach the highest round of questions. Further, an Agricultural Science teacher at a secondary school challenged his charges to learn the botanical and local names of several local weeds and grasses. After a two-week period he went back to the class and presented a test to determine how many names were learnt verbatim. He then chose the best student to represent the school in an Agricultural Science competition. The chosen student went on to win the competition. This teacher demonstrated the ability to use challenge power to motivate and sustain engagement in learning- many students of the said teacher went on to distinguish themselves in science at university level.

1.4 Interest Power

Interest power is articulated when the teacher demonstrates the ability to hold students' attention while successfully while demonstrating, illustrating or instructing, thereby stimulating follow-on academic engagement or movement in the desired learning pathway. Again, the emphasis is not on the inherent nature of the material being presented but on the communication competencies that the teacher employs or manner in which the material is presented to deliberately evoke, capture and hold the interest of the students. This is important because many times inherently interesting material can be presented in such a way that no interest is evoked.

There are times in teaching when teachers must make mundane topics come to life. A case in point was when a secondary school Biology teacher asked students to read a chapter in the textbook and ask for clarification on what they did not understand –no one really read anything. By contrast another Biology teacher, covering the same lesson, took the said students to the lab, brought the upper torso of the human body with removable layers and organs and began to teach the lesson. The former teacher demonstrated the uncanny ability to make an inherently interesting lesson about the human body flat and boring while the latter captivated the *interest* of her charges. Another teacher noting his students' lack of desire to do poetry brought to class samples of the items from the content of the poems and had students explore the school grounds for flowers written about in other poems. Some students were even asked to draw what the poets wrote about- these strategies meant that poetry became an item of personal interest for the students involved.

The key questions that underpin this reflective report include:

1. What types of power displays are seen in the contemporary classroom?
2. How are these power manifestations displayed in classrooms?
3. How do prospective and cooperating teachers relate to these power manifestations?
4. What are the benefits or negative effects of these power manifestations?

2. Methodology

2.1Participants and Data

Classroom discourses between teachers and students in the classrooms of six secondary schools formed the basis for reflection and articulation of power as developed and discussed in this paper. Quicke (1999) cites Elliot (1991) as positing that reflection is valuable in developing teacher professionalism as 'action initiates reflection' and reflection in turn 'initiates action' (p.58). This *double mode* of reflection prompted careful examination of issues related to the power discourses considered here. In the first instance, 'action' in the classroom (re: teacher-student discourses) initiated *reflection* and later this reflection found expression in *recommendations* for future actions. Based on the socioeconomic status of the catchment area related to each school, two schools could be classified as upper middle class, two as lower middle class and two as lower class.   In each school, Social Studies classes were observed at all form levels -forms 1 – 5 (grades 6-10).

2.2 Reflective Analysis

The concepts of power as defined in this piece were determined based on the ability of teachers to get students to be meaningfully engaged in the lesson especially when there were competing distractions. Thus, the definitions of power explicated in this paper were developed as definitions which might be best used to represent the specific dialogue or communicative exchanges between teachers and students in the classroom. For example, the behaviours and interactions that followed a teacher's or students' attempts to wield power were analyzed as the effects or consequences of the power-oriented discourse.

Additionally, prospective teachers gave permission for their reflective portfolios and dialogues with cooperating teachers at post-lesson conferences to be included in the researcher's reflections as data that could confirm or deny these perceptions of power as intimated here. Thus, this paper represents an integrative approach based on reflections garnered from *in situ* discourses, prospective teachers' reflective portfolios and post-lesson conferences that the author held with both the prospective and cooperating teachers.

From this reflective perspective each conceptualization of power (authority, knowledge, challenge and interest) is defined and represented with actual classroom observations and information from the other sources just mentioned. Each of these articulations is followed by recommendations to complete the cycle with reflection initiating action.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1Observational Analysis

3.1.1Authority Power Observations. In all the classes observed, students appeared to fear *authority power* the most. In fact, in some instances students were very much intimidated by it. These fears and perceptions surrounded the fact that sanctions and punishments were mostly associated with authority power. This was especially the case in lower form levels where the perception of punishment (corporal or other major sanctions) was real and always imminent. A difference was perceived in the students' perception of *illusory* and *real* authority power. They appeared to feel that prospective teachers only had *illusory* authority power and that the *real* form lay in the hands of the actual class or cooperating teacher. This was reinforced since in many instances the cooperating teacher would intervene with a stern look, warning, sanction or reprimand to an individual or group or the entire class to restore order and get the lesson back on track. In such circumstances, the prospective teacher looked on helplessly and powerlessly.

Additionally, there was also a difference at fourth and fifth form levels (equivalent to grades 9 and 10) where students presented a greater challenge to authority power than they did at the earlier form levels. In fact, the same teacher who had great authority power control at the lower forms was not so successful when attempting to wield authority power at the upper levels of the school. Students showed less fear of authority power as they grew older, consequently there was less conformity and less engagement.

This study also found that prospective teachers attempted to switch to *authority power* if things were not going the way they planned but this approach usually backfired-with students becoming less engaged and more belligerent (Larkin, 1975). This type of response –*non-compliance*- was also seen among students from urban high schools in a US study in response to authority power (Cothran and Ennis, 1998). As previously noted, students saw prospective teachers as mere 'trainees' without *real* authority power. In fact, in some instances they were seen as *transients* who were to be tolerated for a few weeks or classes before they were gone forever. This especially occurred among upper forms in secondary school (i.e. fourth form level or higher or grade 9 or higher) where prospective teachers were usually left alone very early in their teaching experience and where the lines of authority, rules and expectations were never really properly established. Concerning this, Larkin (1975) contends that 'when teachers focus on power relationshipswithoutconsideration of legitimatingdevices as a mode of retaining control of the classroom, they find themselves in a situation in which opposition is generated' (p. 409).

In some situations cooperating teachers prevented many a classroom management meltdown from occurring with timely *authority power* interventions. In other circumstances, fearing the worst, their authority power interventions were premature and preempted authority power discourses between prospective teachers and students. Some prospective teachers felt that inthoseinstances the cooperating teacher never really gave them a chance to 'run' or control the class.

Another interesting factor that seemed to mediate authority power success in schools was students' socioeconomic status (SES). Students from middle and upper class backgrounds, attending the more prestigious institutions, presented a greater challenge to prospective teachers' authority power but showed greater respect for their actual teachers. In this regard, these students showed a greater tendency to push the envelope when interacting with prospective teachers and to be less conforming to classroom rules and regulations. This is possibly related to the sense of entitlement that such students bring to the classroom (Gladwell, 2008). On the other hand, students from lower SES backgrounds attending less 'prestigious' institutions showed a greater tendency to submit to authority power of prospective teachers while they were perceived to be quite difficult by their actual teachers (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010).

3.1.2 Knowledge Power Observations. In the actual classroom setting knowledge power appeared to be quite critical to any teacher exerting a positive influence on student engagement. Students were very focused and attentive when teachers delved into subject content and presented it in an articulate manner. It was also observed that when students had confidence in the teachers' knowledge power, they were more relaxed in class and showed a greater tendency to ask questions. There were, however, two mediating factors. One was the teacher's ability to communicate in a language register that was similar to or above that of the students. This was particularly the case at the schools where the student body comprised of mainly middle and upper class students. These students showed a tendency to correct grammar and mispronunciations of teachers who spoke in registers below their SES.

In one case, the situation was so bad that students were more focused on the language inadequacies of the prospective teacher and not on the lesson content itself which was solid. In another situation, the teacher showed weaknesses in content knowledge which meant poor knowledge power. Students in the latter scenario commented that they would wait and asked their "actual" teacher, the cooperating teacher, for clarification. After this, they tuned out of the lesson that was in progress (Payne & Cangemi, 1998).

In yet another classroom, there was a shift in the power alignment away from the teacher as some students demonstrated greater content knowledge on the particular topic understudy. Not only was the teacher's knowledge power undermined but other students began to bargain for privileges that were not sought prior to this. The prospective teacher was forced to acquiesce given the demonstration of a lack of knowledge power. As such, what was seen here was teacher and students in a power brokerage with students requesting more concessions than they would under normal circumstances. In this context, Quicke (1999) contends that 'participants in the discourse of a practice are never completely without power and therefore never without agency and thus the potential to initiate change- a conceptualization described by Foucault as the 'circulation of power' (p.65).

Another situation which showed the influence of knowledge power was when a prospective teacher failed to acknowledge divergent responses from high ability students during a lesson. The students became difficult and an unhealthy power contest ensued. The students closed ranks and became uncooperative bringing the lesson to a premature end. The prospective teacher was brought to tears wondering what had gone wrong. She did not realize that the students were using their knowledge to broker power in the classroom. Payne and Cangemi (1998) argue that students are not powerless but actually provide or withhold power from their teachers. When the students' attempts failed, they withdrew their cooperation and engagement in the lesson; as a consequence the teacher was rendered powerless.

3.1.3Challenge Power Observations. In education literature the concept of academic challenge or academic press is well researched.The findings regarding this phenomenon identify the quality of challenge presented to students as important in motivation and engagement to learn (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010). Research in this field also posits that a lack of effective challenge in the classroom leads to demotivation and disengagement. Field observations in this study highlighted the benefits of challenge power in the classroom. In the first instance, a prospective teacher divided a class of first formers into two groups (facing each other) for a competitive quiz on marijuana. The teacher directed questions on the content covered in the lesson to each group. The entire class was engaged, the level of challenge was appropriate and the excitement and engagement were high. There were lots of post-lesson discussions among the class members about the issues covered.

In another scenario, after a lesson on environmental degradation, a 'difficult' third form class was taken through a round of creative activities- poster making, poem construction and song writing. The entire class was engaged up to the recess bell and had to be stopped. They were appropriately challenged and they rose to the challenge presented by the prospective teacher in the varying activities.

Two other incidents also served to identify the bane of underutilized challenge power. In one circumstance, second form (grade 8) students were taught a lesson about the importance of Primary Health Care (PHC) then asked to identify activities that were PHC activities and those that were not. This post-lesson activity was presented in such a way that the answers were very obvious. One student commented, 'what happen, we in kindergarten or what?' These students then began to find ways of making the activity more challenging by giving 'unexpected or wrong responses' and showing how these responses could be construed or interpreted as correct. The prospected teacher was flabbergasted. She did not see what was happening. The power was taken away from her. A nasty battle of words ensued and the students won. In exasperation, the teacher shouted, "shut-up, stop talking stupidness." The class happily obeyed but only in passive resistance and the lesson came to a premature end. Again, it was noted that this occurred at a school with middle SES students who were higher achievers.

The second circumstance was one where the prospective teacher engaged fourth form students in "a little game." It seemed that the reference to the activity as 'a little game' signalled to students that is was trivial. As a result of the words employed to introduce the activity, students became playful and distracted, thus, the benefit and the importance of the activity were not realized. Probably, if the same activity were presented as a challenge, proper engagement may have continued and the objectives of the exercise achieved.

3.1.4 Interest Power Observations. In the first scenario, a lesson on adult suffrage was delivered. The prospective teacher came to class with a ballot box. He placed it on the teacher's desk then spoke briefly about an election that was taking place with a local political party (the then opposition party in the parliament of Trinidad & Tobago). He then allowed the students to cast their ballots using their school ID card and had someone appointed as the presiding officer. The issue the class voted on was about the return of their test papers. Each student's interest was piqued and held throughout the lesson as the issues and history related to adult suffrage were dealt with. Towards the end, the ballots were tallied. The teacher had effectively used something without inherent interest a plain ballot box- but the whole presentation was infused with interest power.

In another circumstance, a teacher built a model home with a fenced yard to illustrate the impact of gateway drugs and other concepts in a lesson. The model was painstakingly done and the details were meticulous. The object itself demanded high interest, however, the third form class (grade 9) was more inclined to discuss and challenge issues related to drug use and legalization rather than interact with the model around which the lesson was planned. Interestingly, another third form class in the same school found the model enthralling and the desired objectives were realized. The prospective teacher realized afterwards that the first class was a group of high achievers who were more interested in cognitive jaunts and debates while the second class was more hands-on and practical in their orientation. The same illustration presented and framed appropriately found resonance with the correct audience. Thus, interest power is only effective when framed within the context and interest of those being taught.

3.2 Recommendations

3.2.1 Utilizing Authority Power. First, it might be necessary for cooperating teachers to legitimately transfer some of their authority power in a practical way to prospective teachers and not see them as neophytes to be continuously shielded and protected. Inadvertently, their perceptions of the prospective teachers' competence and ability to manage a class are communicated to the students who respond accordingly. Additionally, prospective teachers must establish the grounds rules for each class early and stick to those rules as far as is possible. In instances when this is done, it works beautifully (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010; Larkin, 1975). In these instances, students see prospective teachers' interventions as important for their learning and academic advancement.

Prospective teachers must also resist the temptation to wield authority power as a club in order to elicit conformity and compliance when the lesson is not going to plan or when students are either distracting themselves or showing little interest in what is being taught. By the same token, they must also be aware that failure to deal with certain behaviours decisively- firmly not harshly- could lead to more serious infractions at later times in the same or subsequent lessons (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010). Such a case was observed with a particular teacher who let things slide and was subsequently 'taken for a ride' in subsequent lessons much to his chagrin and consternation.

3.2.2 Utilizing Knowledge Power. Prospective teachers should be aware of the differences between lower and higher SES schools and the challenges presented by students in the latter. This calls for them to hold higher expectations from all students in general and those from higher SES backgrounds in particular. Prospective teachers must also seek for a more thorough and in-depth knowledge base as preparation for all lessons. This type of preparation will them give greater confidence in their ability to deliver and satisfy student's desire to question (sometimes as a testing mechanism of the prospective teacher's knowledge competence). Prospective teachers must also find creative ways to utilize student knowledge to enhance lesson delivery and engagement. This is what building a community of learners is all about. Thus, prospective teachers would be using insights from knowledge power to create an optimal learning environment (Price, 2008). Prospective teachers must also be aware of the sensitivity of some students to delivery of lessons below their register or with consistent grammatical or other flaws. In some situations the language of delivery is just as important as the content being communicated.

3.2.3 Utilizing Challenge Power. Prospective teachers should study more carefully their new charges and liaise with cooperating teachers in order to determine the appropriateness and best approaches to academic task activities which utilize*challenge power* effectively. This is very important because modern day students become bored very quickly if they are not challenged in meaningful ways. In fact, it is easy for interest to wane and engagement to decline if students are not pushed to think deeply and critically about the topics or concepts that they have to treat with in the classroom. Teachers also benefit from developing their challenge power as they are forced to think outside the box and to develop new ways of stretching the mental faculties and aiding the cognitive development of their charges.

3.2.4 Utilizing Interest Power. Getting students interested and 'signed on' throughout the utilization of interest power demand careful analysis and observation. The involvement of the students themselves in the activity and the use of local examples are also critical in gaining and holding interest in the lesson. One particular lesson was so well organized with points of interest that one student doubted whether two class periods (80 minutes) had passed so quickly while so much work had been covered. There were no classroom-management issues from this class that had a history of disinterest and disengagement.

4. Conclusion

Classroom discourses between teachers and students reveal that power is evident in each classroom. This paper argued that based on reflections of the experiences examined, four concepts of power emerge; authority, knowledge, challenge and interest power. Authority power appears to be the most profound and feared among students. Knowledge power needs appropriate articulation. Challenge and interest power are critical frameworks to carry the lesson to its explicit or implicit climax and assessment phases. The wise practitioner who exploits these power bases carefully and shares them with students will truly democratize the classroom and assist her charges in gaining the most from their educative experiences. Additionally, the issue of language register also appears to play a mediating role according to the teaching-learning context. The changes in the teaching-learning environment today create serious demands on teachers and their charges. The articulation of power and its devolution are two of the most critical of these demands worthy of further research and analysis as featured in this study.

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