THEMATIC RESEARCH

Power and Authority at School

Conflict in School Relationships from the Perspective of Early Childhood Teachers

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Abstract:
This article analyzes the problems of power at school. The concepts that early childhood teachers attribute to power are linked to their ideas regarding the identity of their work and their participation in scholastic change in Argentina. The paper suggests that teachers' reflections on this topic express a conflict with no easy solution, due to the peculiar civic/political status of childhood as the "object" of teaching work, and the common-sense analogy that equates power with violence and domination.

Key words: school, teaching work, power, authority, early childhood

Introduction

Power, its notions of use and habitual exercise among early childhood teachers will be considered an “analyzer” of the processes that intervene in the social construction of work identity; the scope and content of power are associated with the eventual transformation of schools in Argentina. The intention is to transcend organizational problems, which link the notion of power to the hierarchies of the educational system or with school management, in order to discuss certain aspects in which such problematic situations are interwoven with the unique complexity of this work.

The concept of power includes a broad semantic set or arc of meanings. Associated with violence, power encompasses practices such as control, correction and coercion, but is also expressed in practices like negotiation or agreements between asymmetrical parties. It refers to the form and content of decision-making that involves interaction with humans and nature. The explanatory capacity of the concept is by no means univocal, and it accompanies the contemporary theoretical debate on social order and the role of individuals in its constitution.

The path followed to produce the present reflections—within an ethnographically oriented research process—will be explained through a “field” situation that occurred in post-dictatorial Argentina (1987), in order to articulate the analysis with basic points of the theoretical discussion. The article will attempt, on one hand, to contribute to the “analytics” of power and authority in the school setting, and on the other hand, to attain an explanatory level
separate from the considerations that define schools simply through their role in reproducing relationships of domination.

We believe it is possible to utilize a procedural perspective to analyze structural determinations (where teaching tradition becomes sediment) in connection with individuals’ interpretations of their work and actions, while understanding the relationships of power at school, in a framework of the school’s specificity as an institution.

**Opposing Logic in the Identity of Work**

In previous articles we sustained that the most general structural characteristic of teaching work is its belonging (in the most part) to the category of “public servants.” In this sense, and according to the classic conceptual distinction of Marx,\(^2\) teaching could be defined as “unproductive” work: since the government provides public service with legitimacy, its meaning is political, i.e., generated from “above” and different from the exchange of equivalents (Batallán y García, 1992b). This peculiarity makes it natural that orientation for education, and therefore the work of teachers, depend on contingent policies promoted by the government. At the same time, it is understood that the social function of education should be directed to socializing children according to the traditions and knowledge recognized as national and universal. Such a legacy and its incorporation into the content of the socializing function constitute the matrix of the subjectivity associated with such work (Batallán y Díaz, 1990).

The structural dependence of the work leads to a “bureaucratic logic” that permeates daily school life since by statute teachers are “obligated” to respond to the mandates, norms and directions of educational policy, independent from the changes, emphasis or orientations presented by certain administrations or during certain historical periods. Contradictory to this logic, which constrains teachers as subordinates, the specificity of their work responds to a “pedagogical logic.” This logic defines and authorizes a teacher’s performance in the framework of parameters that respond not only to the specificity of the work, but also to renovated pedagogical theories that increasingly indicate autonomous action, openness and creativity as conditions of professional teaching activity (Batallán, 1998).

As a matter of act, the government’s political orientation that regulates schools as institutions intervenes decisively in the meaning teachers attach to the notion of power. According to the meaning that emanates from “bureaucratic logic,” subordination to the unquestionable authority or hierarchy established by the system is relative, depending on the orientation of global policies. If during dictatorial periods, these policies have contributed to visualizing schools as unquestionably hierarchical institutions, during times of democracy, schools have been considered a space for deliberation and agreement where participation will permit full realization of the school “community”. It could be assumed, therefore, that the changes in educational policy that have occurred during the democratic period offer a framework conducive for teachers to emphasize professional characteristics of autonomy and freedom, associated with the intellectual nature of their activity, and distance themselves from the subordination derived from their condition as public servants.
The orientation of current educational policies, however, cannot be evaded. Union struggles and academic debates on schools as equalizing institutions have intensified in response to policies of structural adjustment first carried out by the Reagan administration in the United States, in the mid-1980s, and then by other nations in the region. Civil urging in general, and the urging of the school community in particular, in favor of preserving the democratizing role of schools in society, and the democratization of school relationships, interact with the implacable advance of educational privatization in the form of companies that manage education. Open competitiveness in terms of corporate discourse for school management, as well as for the sale of education with instrumental objectives of school “success” has configured controlled democratization in schools that is limited, in general terms, to “participative efficiency” or “efficient participation”. Such tension produces a sort of anomic in the events of daily school life, since that is where one can perceive the structural limits imposed by the non-school context on genuinely democratic participation, as well as the barriers to consensus and deliberation among the members of the “school community” that are placed by the search for efficiency.

The opposing logic that involves the identity of teaching work and the historical and political meaning they assume in the current context, should be understood in relation to the uniqueness of the school world. Since it is a “childhood world,” it encompasses family/domestic relationships that create a unique connective climate characterized by a distribution of emotional burdens among the members of the institution. The affection inherent to dealings between children and adults/teachers allows teachers to make various projections about their work (in a psycho-sociological sense) that overwrite institutional roles. These projections include “maternal” functions, or functions of care and protection, and “paternal” functions linked to coercion or correction, although it is now possible to reconstruct a meaningful degree of dispersion in the association of emotions to each gender. The emotional and domestic construction of relationships and roles in daily school life occurs not only in teachers’ interactions with children, but also, and more relevantly, in the set of relationships among the various adults involved.

Due to the above, the problematic situation of power, associated with teachers’ work in schools—although similar to other work in bureaucratic institutions—obtains its uniqueness in a complex amalgam in which the following intervene:

a) the sedimentation of doctrinaire traditions regarding education and the social function assigned to the task;

b) the structural and specific characteristics of the activity;

c) the political processes that constitute the type of government during each moment of history; and

d) the different strategies teachers put into play with regard to contingent policies (global or local) as well as the exercise of absolute roles and in interactions between equals and other individuals in the “school community” during daily life at school.

This final analytical plane—that of significant action—permits reflecting on habitual notions and the use of power and authority at school, by incorporating ethnographic material. Generated in the context of participatory research with teachers, the ethnographic material, by
contrasting theoretical categories with those of meaning, allows documenting interpretations of
daily interaction at school based on problematic situations, as we shall see below.

**The Blind Knot of Power**

The political determination of this project permits arguing, fairly, that reflection on power, its
possession, delegation and attributes—although apparent throughout daily life at school—emerges only in problematic situations that are resolved unsatisfactorily. The conflict of
interlacing political/educational mandates attributed to the school with the school’s daily
events, in a world of interchangeable and unstable confrontations—and in which the teacher’s
decision-making space is the classroom—implies a “blind knot” for the teaching sector to be
able to become a “key” social subject in possible educational transformation (see Batallán,
2000, 2002). In effect, empirical research permits describing analytically that in the context of
these contradictory orientations, the old system of vertical authority—which begins with
directors’ control over teachers and continues with teachers’ control over children—has
entered a state of crisis, without having been replaced by pedagogical or political alternatives.

The dignity of the position, character and trappings that traditionally have symbolized
authority at school have lost their naturalized position and have produced “a conflict of
language,” as stated by Geertz (1987), of uncertain results. In the framework of neo-liberal
globalization, this conflict takes the shape, not of a cultural clash (as understood classically),
but of incongruent codes and values in the social/work conditions that permit market
“freedom” and the conditions of citizens’ equality and freedom inherent in a democracy.

Thus if on one hand, the significant dimension of social life is expressed through the common
meaning interwoven in daily relationships, on the other hand, it is possible to say that the
shared forms and codes respond to an ideological ordering with institutional roots or
“customary order” (Rockwell, 1980). Such categories and codes permit describing the world
while facilitating mutual understanding. This dimension does not deplete reality, since the
intentional results of action constitute objectivity that transcends reality, but it presents “the”
possible and legitimate world for actors.

Analytically, order at school, although produced routinely through daily practices, is also
modified or altered by other practices and alternative discourses that adhere to or plan to make
the promised institutional ideology a reality.⁴ Therefore, the discovery of individuals’
interpretations of their practices and their world responds to an interest in understanding the
indivisible compound of objectivity and subjectivity that forms social reality. This premise
calls for an explanation of some of the methodological indications related to the role of
empirical material in this essay.

In first place, it is necessary to clarify that the analyzed information was produced in the
framework of a research workshop with teachers, understood to be an “artificial” field (based on
an explicit notification directed to teachers for researching their work practices) in a co-
participating body, within a study on teacher work and schools that includes other dimensions
of analysis.⁵ The notion of participation put into play in this methodological framework
assumes that individuals’ interpretative criteria of their world are obtained and interpreted,
jointly and in tension, based on the conceptual relationships expressed by coordination at the
beginning of the workshops. These anticipations of meaning delimit the “field” and surpass it as a factual entity. It is this game of inclusion and “plus” that permits comparing the empirical “findings” with progressive interpretations and theoretical preparations that are carried out. This means that individuals’ descriptions, classifications, distinctions and interpretations, while arising from the empirical world, are deconstructed in the process of research, in contrast with the descriptions, classifications, distinctions and interpretations of the general research. At the same time, the recognition of the uniqueness and originality of this world makes possible the progressive reformulation of the initial hypotheses or assumptions, in a spiral process that according to its saturation, is concluded.

Disciplinary Overflow (Power/Authority Game in a Fictitious Scenario)

Developed here will be the meaning attached to the idea of “a blind knot of power,” resulting from a fragment of a field situation dealing with the problematic situation of discipline in a research workshop with teachers.

From a general perspective, children as the “object” of work and the socializing mandate of teachers give the impression of the “formative” character of the pedagogical association, in which the teacher must intrinsically incarnate authority prior to educational interaction. In this manner, the maintenance of order, which translates into counteracting, containing or sanctioning disciplinary problems, becomes the main task (manifest or implicit) of teachers’ work in the classroom.

The situation to be presented had the explicit nature of a projective exercise introduced as a free game (or dramatization) within the framework of group activity. The group, intentionally heterogeneous, was formed by classroom teachers and directors, males and females, with differing years of experience in teaching. In order to illustrate the participative form of the study, three levels of interpretation were included in a dramatic game involving a freely chosen situation and acted out by a sub-group of workshop participants. On this initial base successive interpretations were constructed, and represent successive “analytical distances” with regard to the first material.

The dramatization is conceived here as a methodological resource marked by what specialists call “descriptive dramatization” or dramatized recounting of present or past events, carried out in a fictitious setting (Martínez Bouquet, 1977; Pavlovsky, 1980). This representational technique was perceived in the advanced development of the workshop as a game with which the teachers are familiar. The coordinators assigned the task of “dramatizing a problematic situation in school life” and the participants reacted with enthusiasm. The roles were distributed voluntarily among those who would act and those who would record their observations of the scene. The actors (symptomatically actresses) devoted a short time to preparing their acting. The remaining group participants would “record” the dramatization, and the two observers of the research team would document the interaction as a whole.

Before the volunteers prepared the setting, the coordinator announced that following the dramatization, opinions would be exchanged regarding the sensations experienced by the actors as well as the observers. The purpose of this exercise was to carry out the progressive distancing of analyzing experiences and observations from different “locations” within and
outside of the dramatization. Based on the scene acted out, the participants were asked to hypothesize on previous events that may have caused the scene, as well on its subsequent resolution.

The dramatized topic was a disciplinary problem in a reading class: two girls are fighting over a book and end up destroying it. The shouting and argument cannot be controlled by the teacher, who in desperation looks for the director to mediate and resolve the situation. The director enters the classroom, but instead of reinforcing the teacher’s authority, humiliates her in the students’ presence for her lack of ability. The director takes the two girls to her office and calls the parents as the usual punishment. The students’ comments reveal the uselessness of the disciplinary measure.

**Chronicle of the Dramatization***

**TEACHER:** Good morning, children.
[The students stand up and return the greeting.]

**TEACHER:** Take out your book and open it to the reading about the neighborhood.
[Two girls fight and are in tears.]

**TEACHER:** Sit down!!! What is going on?! [a loud shout]

**GIRL 1:** I ripped her book [Girl 2, crying].
[The teacher, shouting, argues with the students.]

**TEACHER:** What happened?
[The teacher does not call the girls by the first names. The girls shout and push each other. One of them takes the teacher’s side, against her fellow students (observer)].

**TEACHER:** If this continues, I’m going to call the director. This has to be solved somehow!! [talks louder, almost shouts]

[The teacher leaves the classroom and returns with the director.]

**TEACHER:** Shall we tell the director what happened?

**DIRECTOR** [turning to the teacher]: But Susana, there are always problems in this grade. What happened?

[The director’s attitude is presumptuous. She talks slowly with crossed arms or her hands on her waist (observer)].

[The teacher and students talk at the same time. The teacher talks with anxiety, as if she were going to cry (observer)].

**DIRECTOR:** You two who had the problem come with me. Bring the appointment books.

**GIRL 2:** My mother can’t come because she works...
[Exit]

End of dramatization (observer).

**The Proto-interpretation, or the Experienced Meaning***

The initial comments on the sensations provoked by the dramatization expressed recriminating judgment of the teacher, manifestations of identification with the students, and ambiguous criticism of the director’s actions. In the sub-group of participants/observers, opinions emphasized the “sadism” and “revenge” the director made evident in the children’s presence, with “well-known” phrases such as “¡qué raro!” (How unusual!), “¡qué bonito!” (How nice!) and the limit imposed by her body language (rigid position with crossed arms).
The participant who played the teacher was surprised by the content of her acting and the contradiction between her real performance and her acting, as well as between her desires and intentions and the results obtained. The common denominator of the group’s interpretation was the guilt attributed to the teacher, and attempts were made to search for the origin of the conflict in problems considered “natural” in children’s interaction: “One girl provoked another, until she ripped the book. This situation is not new. It always happens. They are the ones who fight. Once again the conflict remains there.”

In the situations imagined after the dramatization, “the parents” appear and represent various known attitudes:

a) Those who defend their children and their own rights, and demand a fair and immediate solution from the school.

b) The parent who demands payment for the destroyed book.

c) The parent who assumes responsibility for the problem unthinkingly and pays without protest to avoid wasting time.

d) The mother who blames the daughter for the complications caused by her bad behavior and the loss of time and money.

In an incipient manner, and related to the categorically accusing interpretation of the teacher’s “poor handling,” some parents question and are concerned about the school’s general flaws. The group reaches a consensus by expressing that these situations are always resolved by making both students responsible for the solution, concretely by sharing the payment.

**The Descriptive Configuration of Diverse Interpretations**

At the following meeting, the coordinators handed out an outline of what they considered had been the lines of interpretation questioned by participant opinions and debate.

1) The first interpretative attempt blamed the teacher and director and considered the children victims of a situation provoked by the “poor handling” of both adults, especially the teacher. The solution naturally linked with this interpretation corresponds to developing strategies to handle discipline.

2) Another attempt, in spite of reinforcing the previous line of interpretation, shares the blame for the situation with the children, who “bring in outside problems” and surpass the possibilities of the teacher and the school in general.

3) Lastly, although the above interpretations are considered correct, mention is made of “an ocean with an institutional bottom”. The acting is viewed as relative and reflections include unfair situations for children that are accepted on a daily basis, as well as criticism of the curriculum and teaching styles. Boredom is the hypothesized cause of the conflict.

After reading the lines of interpretation that the coordinators stated had been mixed, participant comments reinforced the third hypothesis: “What happens is that the students questioned the task. Have you ever been in a reading class?” (directed to coordinator). “The
teacher has them read one by one and corrects them by saying, “You didn’t show the comma, you have no intonation” (in a scornful tone).

Although the dramatized disciplinary topic found its place in the end near pedagogy, the participants agreed that the problem is solved differently according to the school context. At this point, one of the participating directors rejected the dramatization as a representative expression of reality at school.

**The Controversy or Confrontation of Perspectives**

“It seemed to be an artificial situation (angry). I never experienced that with so much aggressiveness... The guilty parties in this situation were the teacher and director.” This criticism (directed to the acting of his role and the participating teachers’ acceptance of the acting) defended the heterogeneity of job performance and showed the existence of opportunities at school for acting in a non-bureaucratic manner.

Various comments made in the workshop emphasized the controversy between teachers and directors. For example, the teacher who played the director’s role stated the following to the (real) director:

> I realize that this happens every day... I’ve never met a director in my whole life who would help you. That’s why you said that you’ve never seen a situation like that. I’ve never seen a director do the opposite of what happened here.

The director immediately responded:

> Yes, yes, as a director, you try to separate yourself from the teacher... What happens is that the director’s office is the school’s sewer. It’s like the [psychoanalytical] couch: the teachers complain about the children, the parents complain about the teachers, the teachers complain about the directors... You have to compose the place.

Given the divided opinions of those who blamed the teacher and those who blamed other individuals at school, an attempt was made to attribute the lack of discipline to the daily constraints of plans and programs. The assumption was that “without them teachers would be more free.”

In spite of examples to the contrary, the devaluation of teachers as well as concern for protecting the children continued to prevail. In general, the exchange of opinions showed an attempt to make the situation relative in a search for consensus and the avoidance of conflict. Comments were directed to finding solutions and sustained that this type of problems is resolved according to the school’s context. This resource, however, revealed the nonconformity of some at the end of the meeting: “We always look for the guilty party.” “We choose to judge instead of reading.”

Such a consideration links the feelings of guilt that accompanied the reflection and analysis following the dramatization, to the uniqueness of the problem of power in pedagogical
interactions between students and teachers. Such interactions are affected by the forms of
domestic or family relationships.

The Daily Meaning of Work and the Problem of Power/Authority in the
Theory of Domination

It can be sustained that the place and action of teachers, constrained by the bureaucratic
control of the system and of society (that delegates children’s education to them), are viewed
as central factors in the success or failure of the school’s socializing objective. From the
perspective of power as an imposition (violence and coercion), teachers’ actions—even when
identified as part of a complex network of assignment and attribution based on the chain of
command—are considered related less to pedagogical experts than to the executors of the
“infinitesimal devices of domination,” such as the distribution of rewards and punishments, or
the arbitrary judgment of “exams,” which result in the inclusion or exclusion of children from
the educational system.

In effect, if the basic relationship of school is teacher/student interaction, power in such
interaction is limited to the teacher, given the asymmetry of the differential resources the
agents mobilize. The teacher’s power is associated not only with the resources of knowledge
he can mobilize in his interaction with students, but also with his societal mandate to conduct
such interaction.

From the perspective teachers have of their own work, however, their “domination” over
children is assigned by their immediate supervisors—directors, who in spite of also being
teachers, assume within the local school setting the maximum power provided by the “system”
and exercise that power over teachers. Therefore, teachers perceive themselves as the weakest
link in the chain, as impotent aggressors and victims.

In the perception of school, the “system” appears as the “touchstone.” It represents an
omniscient and indisputable entity to which local directors appeal in the face of pressures from
teachers, children and their adult representatives. This game of interactions in relation to the
possession of power in daily school life oscillates between the official justification of “due
obedience” and “hot potato.” Such ambiguity—expressed in diverse forms of resistance—is
due to the institution’s difficulty in responding to the requirements of democratic participation
as well as the demands for efficiency from neo-liberal policies. The progressive predomination
of such policies is evident in the increased competitiveness within and between schools.

It can be sustained that the common meaning of power in everyday school life is unable to
distance itself from its repressive or imposing connotation (from the top down), since the
vertical functioning of the bureaucracy of any public institution (which requires obedience to
authority, or to the orders of superiors) is added to the purpose of the school mission: to
introduce the new generations to traditions valued in a hegemonic manner. Due to this
characteristic, the attributes of power are possibly seen “from above” as exclusive to
institutional hierarchies, and are naturally associated with arbitrariness and symbolic violence.

Foucault’s argument (1982) regarding the need to produce an “analysis” of power to
reconstruct it genetically is undoubtedly a fruitful suggestion for studying relationships at
school. In effect, power in school life is present as a setting from which, like the atmosphere, one cannot escape. Its presence and complexity permit considering the author's thesis that not even at school—in spite of the bureaucratic organization—is power a “binary game from the top down” exercised by one group over another (without a “staff”), as suggested by the monarchic/legal model and the resulting classical treatment. Its meaning goes farther: power consists of multiple relations of force, “specific to their domain.” In the case of schools, the analysis or rebuilding of such power must begin from “local focuses” of knowledge/power, with the understanding that “there is a pendulum between forms of domination and schemes of knowledge” (Foucault, 1993).

Of course, the “strategic” perspective to understand power considers resistance to imposition, which, consubstantial to the model, is not only one. In addition, it shows an irregular distribution. Such strategies are unique and are manifested “in a game of unceasing struggle and conflict” (Foucault, 1993).

According to this perspective, the notion of “educational community”—commonly applied to school institutions—is coherent in its uniqueness as a mediating institution between civil society and the state. Although strongly oriented by overall policies that assign functions to teachers’ work and indicate the content and forms they must utilize (to achieve what is considered the children’s good socialization), the educational community’s functions fade beyond the specifics of learning skills and cognitive abilities. The resulting lack of definition predisposes confrontation between the various parts of the “community” (teachers versus parents and guardians, directors versus teachers, etc.). It could be sustained, according to Foucault, that power is dispersed, is found in the interstices of all interactions, and circulates in “unstable” relationships (Foucault, 1993).

In this manner, the phenomenon of power at school would overflow and permeate bodies and discourses. In spite of the intensity of the Foucault-based argument, however, the dialectic presented by the model is annulled, in our opinion, due to the implicit general framework of the theory. Such a framework assimilates the final objective of power as domination, which it carries out unceasingly—like a self-fulfilling prophesy—beyond changes of a different type.

Thus, without denying the conclusive argument and the disclosure contributed by Foucault’s ideas, the rejection of the possibility of truth with regard to systems of power sterilizes criticism, since domination is always the final result: “Power is a multiple and mobile field of relationships of force where overall effects are produced, although unstable to domination.”

The focuses of structuralism/reproductivism (Althusser) and post-structuralism (Foucault) have points of affinity. One such point is the lack of recognition of the efficiency of action. Power, in both focuses, is something that simply happens to agents, who are the vehicle or the means of circulation of power that escapes absolutely from their control. In such theories, no conceptual resources exist to permit establishing the link between action and power. As Giddens (1984) has revealed, power is inherent to human work, and social action means intervening in the world, the ability to “make a difference” in a situation or course of preexisting events. This assumes a perspective from which power is not something that passes through agents or an affectation they passively receive; the action itself implies power in that it represents a transforming aptitude. Another aspect shared by both focuses is the identification of power and force (or violence). According to structuralism, the ideology is submission,
overpowering, inculcation or symbolic violence. They distinguish the repressive apparatus from ideological apparatuses, but on emphasizing the moment of falsity of the ideology and its material functioning, they considerably weaken the distinction (see Foucault, 1980).

Towards the Construction of the Argument: the Power and Specific Nature of School Relationships

On returning to the hypothesis of the complex mixture that intervenes in the social construction of the identity of teaching work, it becomes obvious that the categories of interpretation affected by the actors in the school world, respond to the particular nature of the relationships (private logic from a unique world). From a general perspective, the socializing mandate of teachers with regard to children, as well as the consideration of children as an “object” of teachers’ work, gives the pedagogical association a “formative” character that is impressed on teaching work. Thus, the maintenance of order during the task taints the pedagogical association, which translates into a concern to counteract, contain or sanction disciplinary problems, given that traditionally the containment of a possible disciplinary excess is the step prior to teaching (or instruction). When teachers reflect on their work, such containment becomes the teacher’s primary task, manifest or implicit. In parallel form, as seen in the dramatic game involving the disciplinary event, teachers’ reflections on having, sustaining and conserving authority and order provoke a conflict not easily solved.

The strong moral prescriptions that emanate from the educational institution when teachers are attributed with graduated hierarchical authority, contradict the free vocational exercise of the task, as well as the democratizing ideology of the function (forming free human beings who are creative and cooperative). Therefore, in the common school meaning, the director (male or female) assumes the characteristics of the archaic father, without representing the authoritarian and arbitrary order that provokes both rebellion and submission (from the child), consubstantial to family ties. In the search for paternal recognition, school interactions are tainted by rivalries among teachers (siblings) as well as behaviors of resistance and resentment of the immediate authority (the director for teachers, the supervisor for directors, etc.). In this framework, teacher/student interaction based on the link of dependence results in alliances or mutual confrontation. Such difficult stability must appeal, when faced with a lack of control, to the costly outside authority (symbolized by the father) to restore lost order. However, within the school’s institutional nature, the bureaucratic authority (the director) who has the power to qualify or disqualify both the work and the worker, supports the teacher in the children’s presence, and humiliates the teacher because of the same need for presence.

The order associated with the strong sensorial meanings of the symbols utilized (which represent violence and chaos) are a “negative” photogram of the institution’s dominant ideological ordering, which is desired and rejected in an ambivalent nature by the teachers.

The symbolic association the teacher makes between exercising his authority (made possible by his relative autonomy in the classroom) with violence towards the children, whom he usually calls “his” children, acts as an impediment to imagining the construction of an alternative order to organize school life. In the framework of the domestic/family ties that prevail at school as a children’s institution, there is a predominating strong feeling of self-condemnation.
with regard to having power. This feeling could be key for explaining why teachers accept or tolerate being the “sacrificial lambs” of the misadventures of school institutions.

**Approaching the Debate on Action and Power**

At this point, we can return to the theoretical reflection on power from the perspective of Hannah Arendt, which shows radical differences from the conceptualizations discussed above. According to Arendt, power is an inseparable part of action; it arises from the temporary agreement of human plurality based on common opinion and thus is distinguished from violence. Power cannot be stored, but exists only in the present and disappears with the extinction of the common agreement that originated it. From this perspective, power cannot cease to be legitimate, since it appears only where actions are taken in agreement; therefore, in the face of any conflict, a reminder is given of its origin. Violence and force, on the contrary, are instruments that need implements, and can be stored and exercised by isolated individuals.

All institutions claim legitimacy based on an initial agreement and as a consequence, on the power that originated them. Institutions disappear or become obsolete when this power is forgotten or revoked by a revolution that, according to Arendt, is another name for the “initial meeting” that originated power. Thus, it could be suggested that the “initial meeting” or “common opinion” is a shared meaning that makes possible the immanent criticism of institutions (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1969).

Based on these considerations, a concept of power can be derived that groups the following characteristics: a) It is micro-physical in that all interaction generates specific power. b) It is legitimate since it originates from a freely assumed agreement. c) It is susceptible to criticism, since all interaction implies relations that go beyond or stay within such agreements, and thus create the possibility of transforming interactions.

It is possible to associate this suggestive focus with the previously mentioned theory of action, to the degree that it permits approaching an explanation that considers individuals not only as practical connoisseurs (practical theorists) of the social world, but also as interpreters that argue about reality (see Giddens, 1984; Batallán y García, 1992a). This means reconsidering the interpretive processes of the common meaning in its alteration or modification. Such processes take shape in the practices and discourses different from the givens; i.e., in the possibility for opinion and criticism of the promised institutional ideology.

Lastly, we find it indispensable to add to the reflection on power and authority at school the notion of the knowledge that circulates in school (its production and distribution). It is this notion that determines the specificity of the institution, for which the concepts of power and authority from political science do not seem appropriate. In effect, the inherent asymmetry in the pedagogical relationship at school, according to the prevailing conception of knowledge and early childhood (historical aspects and rights) converts the “school community” into a euphemism: its main actors, the children— as stated by Adorno (1973)— are not individuals with “full rights” and therefore lack a “legitimate” voice.

The transitional characteristic of childhood places interactions in the world of school in a zone of ambiguous tensions marked by the delegation and assumption of rights and obligations by
representatives of civil society (parents and guardians) and the state, represented by school authorities and teachers—the school’s public face at the local level. Added to the transitional characteristic of children at school, which annuls them as individuals, is the devalued conception of the knowledge that circulates at school. Such knowledge, on being compared with information “made to order” for students, must be transmitted uniformly in stages previously established by the educational system. In this manner, teachers, instead of being responsible for an intellectual task, become simple executors or transmitters of knowledge produced by others.

To conclude, we sustain that the problematic situation of power within the uniqueness of the school world, encompasses, on one hand, the recognition of contradictory logic within the work of teaching, and on the other hand, an acceptance of the complexity assumed by teaching in its everyday dimension, which of course exceeds the responsibility assigned to this sector of workers. Stimulating debate at school on this perspective can undoubtedly contribute to the democratization of school relationships.

Notes

1 A version of this article was presented at the ninth symposium on ethnographic research in education (IX Simposio de Investigación Etnográfica en Educación) held in Mexico in October of 2000, and entitled: “La investidura del cargo. El poder y la autoridad en la escuela” (unpublished). The paper includes problems and field records of two research projects I direct: “El trabajo docente en Argentina. Significación social y lucha gremial” and “La problemática del poder y la autoridad en la escuela primaria. Varones y mujeres en cargos de conducción”. Both projects are for the Instituto de Ciencias de la Educación de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Buenos Aires, with the support of the university’s Secretaría de Ciencia y Técnica. I acknowledge Liliana Dente, co-coordinator of the first project, and Graciela Morgade, co-director of the second, as well as the researchers and team members: Patricia Maddoni, Daniel Suárez, Ana Padawer, Alejandro Arri, Susana Zattara and Gladys Skoumal.

2 For the distinction between productive and unproductive work and the analysis of their forms of legitimacy, see Marx, (1974: 332-349).

3 For a systematization and the precedents of this model, see Pini, M. (2003).

4 The promise of institutions is provided by their ideology, whose content stimulates rational adhesion due to its expression of the principles of equality and justice inscribed in the founding of modernity. The falseness of the ideology does not reside in its content, but in its relationship with what exists; its “excess meaning” transcends what actually exists. The promise of institutions, in this case schools, is an obligation that permits criticism of what exists and claims legitimacy. See Adorno and Horkheimer (1969).

5 Research on teaching work and school transformation forms part of an interdisciplinary program that has been developing for more than twenty years with a predominantly historical/anthropological focus. Several projects have included a body of joint research: the research workshop, whose framework responds to the demands for immersion in individuals’ interpretive codes according to the rules for fieldwork within the ethnographic tradition. Since the workshop is a relatively prolonged encounter, participation is constructed progressively in a process of joint research dialogue. This proposal discards, of course, the exoticness linked to the ethnographic notion of alteration and assumes contexts constructed by institutional ideologies susceptible to polemic
interpretations. The workshops are a method of joint research in a group since they promote the central aspect of participants’ progressive learning with regard to their daily work practice, as well as the sociopolitical determinants in their work.

This is made possible by constructing an epistemological “distance” — constructed and contained expressly in workshop encounters. From the technical/operational point of view, resources of group work are utilized (fun techniques of participant integration, analysis of the textual records of encounters, dramatization of problematic situations, explanations and indication of aspects implicit in constructing the groups and the development of research work); the descriptive restitution of topics and categories of common meaning in the world of school and work; delivery of theoretical and documentary information, etc.. In this manner, the participants approach knowledge of the “object” they build, as well as integrating the value of the experience and the emotions put into play, distinguishing the inherent logic of different viewpoints, and reaching partial agreements after the clearing and systematization of conflicts among interpretations. For an approach to the epistemological and theoretical foundations of research workshops see: Batallán, (1984); Batallán, Saleme y García (1986); Batallán y García (1989); Batallán, García y Morgade (1988).”

6 Dramatization is employed as an operative resource for accessing the imaginario, considered a continuum of the reality that operates as an intermediate structure of articulation with the abstract entities of thought. The components of the imaginario have a dramatic structure with individuals and organized forces in action and can be represented in almost always visual form. Since accessing its elements is not possible from a logical viewpoint, use is made of the arts, of psychodrama, role playing, etc.. Observing and analyzing these structures of concrete existence permit inferring underlying scenes; i.e., the representation of the real aspects that accompany practice. The production and practice of representational exercises require commitment that surpasses perception; for this reason, their use as an instrument of research and self-reflection is possible in processes of interaction that have already constructed a link of confidence. The emotions and dynamic tension mobilized by these techniques (opposition, values, conflicts, etc.) are a privileged means of access to the imaginario, due to the structural (dramatic) correspondence determined by these and underlying scenes. Thus, from the imaginario, we once again prove that the production of knowledge is carried out through emotions and not in spite of them. See Batallán et al. (1986:42-58). I acknowledge the social psychologist, Guillermo De Carli, for his contributions on this point in the didactic design of teacher workshops.

7 Recorded by the observers of the research team.

8 I take from Taylor (1985) the idea of slippage in the notion of interpretation from a subjective (or proto-interpretative) meaning towards an explanation with meaning: “there is no complete heterogeneity of the interpretation with respect to what it is about, given the configuration that permits the language in which the agent experiences these meanings.”

9 In his brilliant essay, “Foucault sobre la libertad y la verdad”, Charles Taylor finds a paradox in Foucault’s work in that his original historical analyses discard the hope offered by his criticism. According to Foucault, power is a form in which we are implicated, which changes historically although stable in its effect. In reference to the development of his argument, he cites a passage from Conocimiento y poder: “We still live in the theory of the old power, understood in terms of sovereignty/obedience. But we really have the new power, which must be understood in terms of domination/subjection. In political theory, we still need to cut off the king’s head.” See Taylor (1988:88).

Bibliography


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