Power and Authority in Adult Education

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Abstract

This paper covers power and authority in adult education, focusing on the modern definitions of power and authority in the educational context, then moving into past precedents of the use of power and authority of classrooms. Finally, the optimal types of power and authority to apply to adult education are examined. Power defines a relationship between two parties where one follows the directives of the other. Authority is a legitimizing of the power, essentially the *why* one party should follow the other. What is concluded is that adults have different needs than younger students, and so power-sharing in the classroom with loose authority is likely the best way to approach an education situation due to the fact that adults are already autonomous in their everyday lives, have fully-developed brain physiology, and are more capable of communicating their concerns in a way that does not require heavy-handed, interventionist types of power and authority.

Keywords:, power, authority , and adult education

1. Introduction

Power and authority are challenging subjects in the realm of adult education. There are clear guidelines for how to educate young children and teenagers in elementary and secondary schools with the use of power and authority, however there is comparatively little research that has been done regarding how an educator should position himself or herself with regards to their control of the classroom. It is generally considered that the educator in an adult education course should take a step back and allow for more autonomy among the students. The questions that this research paper will seek to ask and subsequently explore are: What is power? What is authority? How have power and authority been implemented in other classrooms? What might be an ideal, general way to implement these elements in adult education and why?

2. What is power?

According to Michel Foucault, a great 20th century thinker, power is a relationship. That is, people with power have the ability to modify the behaviors of other people through the threat of violence, economic clout, or political/social authority. Power is *not* the actual enactment of whatever capacity that the stronger party in the relationship holds because the elements of your relationship no longer check the actions of another, but rather it is your gun, the shackles that bind them, or some other form of physical, corporeal inhibition that blocks their freedom. Furthermore, power cannot exist without some measure of freedom. The two must go hand-in-hand. If there is not freedom, then you do not really have any behavior to modify in the first place.

An example of power as it is described by Foucault would be in the relationship between a professor and his students. The professor has the power by which to grant grades and that will modify the relationship that he has with his students. Generally speaking, the students who seek to take advantage of their professor's position of power by winning his good grades will do the assignments that he assigns. Certainly, the students have all the freedom in the world to *not* do the assignments, but they will not win the future credibility of the institution nor the professor when they seek to find a job or perhaps apply to other schools in the future. Thus, we see here that the professor has a position of power that is vested in him by the university to allot grades and judge the performances of students.

Max Weber takes a different position on power, whereby he defines power as the actual enactment of violence and/or the violation of a person's physical space by another. So an exercise in power would be the forcible restraint of a student in a school. This differs from Foucault's definition of power in that Foucault sees things a bit more abstractly. As was stated before, in the Foucault definition of power, if a child at a school were to be restrained, that would have meant the power relationship failed. What was now enforcing power against the child would be the actual restraints (i.e. handcuffs, security guards, other teachers), and not the person or people with whom the power relationship was established.

Weber has a negative view on power, stating that it is what occurs once authority has failed. Authority will be discussed in detail in another section, although it is essentially the Foucault definition of power where people fall into line within a hierarchy because of the potential of the exercise of power by the authority. In Weber's view, power yields negative results in an organization and its exercise will likely lead to much more insubordination somewhere down the line.

2.1 Abdicated, autocratic, and relinquished power

Erika Kitzmiller (2013), who studied power and authority in classrooms in detail, describes three types of power: abdicated power, autocratic power, and relinquished power. Abdicated power describes a situation where the teacher lacks authority with their students and thus they do not respect his directives. In this scenario, the behavior issues have gotten so far out of control that the teacher has essentially ceded power to the students themselves who take the responsibility of regulating classroom behavior while the teacher essentially looks on and collects a paycheck. This is viewed as an extremely cynical position and is generally seen in extraordinary circumstances.

Autocratic power is essentially the opposite of abdicated power where rather than compensating for their lack of authority through a state of hypo-vigilance, the teacher assumes a state of hyper-vigilance whereby they micromanage and obsessively try to control the actions of students in the classroom in a desperate attempt to get them to behave. Essentially the teacher will quash any behavior that they see as a potential threat to their authority in the classroom and this can lead to a number of innocent students seeing themselves being accused of intentions that they never had. In the long run, this only leads to a lack of respect and a degraded learning environment.

Relinquished power is similar to abdicated power except for the fact that the teacher has handed over authority to another person within the organization because they are essentially unable to assert either authority or power on their own. This usually comes in the form of having some sort of security personnel, administrator, or another teacher sit in on the class to ensure that students are not misbehaving.

2.2 Legitimate, reward, expert, and referent power

Power can be also divided into four types: legitimate, reward, expert, and referant. Legitimate power describes a relationship whereby the power is derived from within some historical or logical context (Smith & Hains, 2012). For example, the President of the United States is traditionally seen as a case of legitimate power in the United States because the Presidency is a position of traditional authority which is widely regarded as legitimate within the American culture. If the people in the USA did not find the authority to be legitimate, then perhaps rather than vote the President into power, they would revolt against him as was done against other presidents throughout the world during events such as the Arab Spring or the recent uprising in Ukraine.

Reward power is the ability to supply subordinates with some type of benefit that causes them to accept a power of subordination to the person in power (Smith & Hains, 2012). On the other side of this reward is the ability to punish, which is through the deprivation of this reward. Going back to the example of the relationship between professor and student, the professor has the ability to reward good grades, while he also has the ability to punish through the allotment of bad grades. The professor might also have the ability to write a recommendation which will lead students to seek subordination within his power structure.

Expert power describes a situation where an individual is able to establish subordination among other people because he possesses some sort of expertise in a subject of great importance (Smith & Hains, 2012). For example, a dentist possesses expert power over most people within a population and, because of this expertise, people will pay the dentist for his time as well as follow his directions about how to care for their teeth and when they are in his office. On the other side, merely having expertise is not necessarily all one needs in order to build a power structure. Having expertise in some esoteric area of botany with little practical application and relevance to the lives of others will likely not yield a power structure.

Finally, referent power is a relationship whereby somebody is so respected and admired that people will accept subordination based on this affection that people have towards him (Smith & Hains, 2012). An example of this might be a retired sports star who finds great admiration in the town where he made his name. People might be willing to accept subordination to him, give him free males and drinks, or otherwise shower him with respect and praise that another person who had not established this respect might not get on a regular basis.

These powers can be combined and, generally speaking, these powers are often exercised in various ways within education in order to yield order in the classroom (Smith & Hains, 2012). In adult education, power is generally derived from expertise and reward powers, as the adults in the classroom are deferring their power to another adult because of a belief that the professor has a superior expertise in a given area of study, as well as the ability to judge their performance in his classroom (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1997).

3. What is authority?

The difference between power and authority has already been touched on from Weber's perspective and it is essentially the same as Foucault's definition of power. It is a relationship whereby people accept a subordinate position to another institution or person because of their potential to launch an exercise of power.

Weber also follows up with the assertion that "where there is authority, there is resistance." In essence, he is saying that the reason why authority is necessary is because there is a resistance in the environment towards the infliction of authority upon certain individuals in the society (Kitzmiller, 2013). People do not want to be

controlled unjustly, which makes perfect sense. Deferring authority to somebody places a population within a position of immense vulnerability, and people do not want to expose themselves to this potential threat.

Given these facts, the responsibility of institutions and individuals who have sought authority is to try and establish the legitimacy of their authority and this has require the expending of enormous resources. Universities, for example use enormous resources in order to establish and maintain their authority by acquiring competent professors, building world-class facilities, and spending money on advertisement for their programs.

3.1 *Interventionist, noninterventionist, and internationalist authority*

Like power, there are various kinds of authority. Within the educational context, three kinds of authority that are discussed are interventionist, noninterventionist, and internationalist styles (Smith & Hains, 2012). Interventionists believe that they must be highly involved with the education of their students and thus "intervene" to a high degree when they are in positions of authority. The teachers in the interventionist paradigm end up strictly managing student behavior and closely follow the performance o their students to ensure that order is maintained in the classroom. The interventionist also selects and closely monitors the external stimuli that students are exposed to thus adding yet another layer to their control (Smith & Hains, 2012).

The noninterventionists believe that students should be allowed to regulate their own behavior. This means standing back and allowing students greater autonomy in both behavior management as well as their own learning. The noninterventionist believes that their students fundamentally have the capacity to self-regulate. Rather than getting overly involved with the student's learning, they seek to align themselves with the self-regulatory tendencies of their students and serve more as an assistant to the ambitions of their students rather than seeking to control the stimuli and reactions of their students (Smith & Hains, 2012).

The internationalist is somewhere in between the interventionist and noninterventionist. They essentially believe that regulation of behavior and stimuli are a partnership between teachers and students and so they incorporate elements of both philosophies in their teaching style. The internationalist will be more prone to negotiating with their students in order to figure out what works best for them (Smith & Hains, 2012).

3.2 *Thwarted, partitioned, goal-oriented, and apprenticed authority*

Kitzmiller (2013) also proposes four different types of authority in addition to her types of power, which are thwarted, partitioned, goal-oriented, and apprenticed authority. Thwarted authority is a scenario whereby the teacher has managed to establish their authority but, unfortunately, they have inconsistently applied the rules of this authority and thus they have lost control of the classroom. Students lose faith in the teacher who inconsistently applies his rules and thus they are both confused and cynical about how the rules will be applied to them. The students will thus preempt the teacher by misbehaving, citing the teacher's inconsistency as the justification for their rebellion.

Partitioned authority is a scenario whereby the teacher has successfully applied and established their authority in their own classroom, but whose authority extends nowhere beyond this classroom. Essentially, the classroom authority is restricted to the confines of their own "bunker," which is what Kitzmiller (2013) calls the classrooms where portioned authority is present. This is a type of authority which does not see collaboration between teachers, administrators, and other disciplinary authorities within the school either because the teacher is uninterested or incapable of doing so.

Goal-oriented authority is similar to the power which is derived from the ability to reward subordinates. Goal-oriented authority refers to a scenario where the teacher establishes their authority by linking themselves to some long-term goal that the student might have. One example that is used by Kitzmiller (2013) is the case of high school students and college. The high school teacher will make clear to the students that good performance in her class is a necessary component in order to move onto the next level at a university and thus establish a career. This type of authority is best used in an environment where students have a long-term orientation.

Finally, apprenticed authority is a style where the authority will delegate authority to various members of a classroom. Essentially, this is a form of distributed authority where the teacher has the final say but still allows enforcement to occur from the student level so that the students will feel a part of the classroom destiny. This mirrors the internationalist type of authority whereby equity is distributed between both teachers and students in the classroom in order to establish harmony in the educational environment (Kitzmiller, 2013).

Kitzmiller states that apprenticed authority is her preferred form of authority, and she establishes four conditions for effective apprenticed authority, which are 1) the clear articulation of expectations from teacher to students, 2) the designing and implementation of disciplinary policies with match the severity of possible offenses, 3) flexibility given to students by abstaining from micro-managing behavior, and 4) parceling out authority to students in a way that makes them feel involved with the destiny in the class, but not so much that the students assume authority over the classroom (Kitzmiller, 2013).

3.3 *Historical precedents for establishment of authority*

Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1997) make a claim that power and authority in educational contexts may be decided based on the race and gender of people in the classroom. Their argument that European-Americans (whites) are typically viewed as natural authority figures in the classroom environment due to historical precedents which saw African-Americans and other ethnic minorities relegated to a position of subordination within the legal framework of the United States. They argue that these perceptions hold to this day, and that race can be a deciding factor in whether or not students will respect the authority of a teacher.

Johnson-Bailey and Cervero thus push a narrative where a racial hierarchy exists within the United States, atop which whites dominate. This domination leads to students of color feeling more timid, less expressive, and thus leading to worse performance in the classroom. To test this assertion, the researchers launched a qualitative study where they administered surveys to members of two classrooms, one which was taught by a white male professor, and the other by an African-American female assistant professor. They found that the students tended to show more respect and thought that the white professor was more of an expert in his field than the African-American woman.

While the study lacks scientific rigor due to its small sample size, it can be considered one of the issues in modern education where students might feel racially insecure or insecure about gender due to historical inequality in the United States and elsewhere in education. Nonetheless, there still exists a framework in the USA which bans racial discrimination. That said, the psychological ramifications of history may have an effect on how people view their authority figures.

5. **How is power and authority applied in adult education?**

Although much of the literature on power and authority in classrooms is written within the context of primary and secondary schools, there are still some lessons that can be applied to the context of an adult educational environment. However, it must be noted, perhaps very obviously, that adults are not the same as primary and secondary education students, and that they have full autonomy and responsibility as adults under the law and within society. Given this reality, certain exercises of power against adults are simply impossible and ill-advised (Marshall, Kiffin-Petersen, & Soutar 2012). One cannot apply the same types of power and authority against adults as they would against children simply because much of the power applied against children in American education is contingent on corporal punishment laws in many states.

Furthermore, an adult has the choice of whether or not they want to be in a certain class in the vast majority of cases while children are required to be in classrooms by law, and thus enormous energy is dedicated towards disciplining them. The adult can simply get up and leave the classroom and there is nothing that authorities or the teacher can do about it other than perhaps give them a bad grade. Thus, because the adult's decision to be in the classroom is largely voluntary, it changes the nature of the classroom greatly (Merriam, 2014).

Because the adult's participation in the class is voluntary, it is far more likely that there will be less disciplinary behavior in an adult education classroom. Since many of these classes cost money, it would mean that the adult would essentially be losing out on their investment if they were misbehaving. Furthermore, the adult has more at risk for misbehavior in a classroom as it is far more likely that they will be ostracized by classmates for interrupting their learning and because they are held liable to the law (Merriam, 2014).

We also see that adults tend toward self-directed learning, which means that they do not require the same educational structure that children and teenagers might feel more comfortable in. Because they are more self-directed, it is likely counterproductive to micromanage them. In fact, micromanaging an adult would be seen as a gross infringement upon their sovereignty as adults and would probably greatly alienate the student and their classmates. Stifling adults also leads to a lack of creativity and innovation, as adults perform best under a system where they are granted a large degree of autonomy and freedom of action (Ringer, 1969).

That said, adults still may require a great deal of direction in the form of curriculum given that there may be a large gap in knowledge between teachers and students (Smith & Hains, 2012). Thus, if we look at a university class as an example, we can see a highly structured curriculum, but a case where the students are essentially self-directed in the way they pursue the material. The professor is able to recommend texts that are required in order to pass the class, and they may also assign assignments to be completed, but it is not as though the teacher can offer any corporal disciplinary action as punishment for a student failing to turn in their assignment.

Rather, if we are to apply the terms from the past two sections to adult education, we would see that professors and teachers in this context largely derive their authority from rewards-based power and expert-based power. The students are in the class because they desire the good grades that the institution can allot to them which builds their credibility with the rest of society who might seek to hire them or ensure that they move onto another institution. The students may also defer to the expertise of the professor, as they might also be taking a class because they desire to learn from a particular professor rather than just being focused on performing well in the class and acquiring a grade. In many ways, we could say that the classroom context is essentially a transfer of

expert power from teacher to student. Once the student learns the information and lessons of the teacher himself, they have acquired some of his power.

Knowing that adults require autonomy and are often self-directed, the types of authority which would be derived from these reward and expert-based powers would be the noninterventionist, internationalist, goal-oriented, and apprenticed authority types. Noninterventionist authority would work in the adult education environment due to the fact that adults are more likely to have greater self-control and will not require that their behavior be directed by an authority figure. They will also have more liabilities and thus accrue greater penalties for misbehavior which makes it less likely that behavioral issues will even occur in the first place. An internationalist stance may be useful in a case whereby the students require more direction in the class, although it is my opinion that the noninterventionist case would be best for the adult education context (Smith & Hains, 2012).

Goals-oriented authority would apply to adult education for reasons mentioned before. The professor or teacher in this context has the ability to assign negative and positive grades, so the students will likely view positive participation in the class as a means to an end, which might be employment or acceptance to another university at some point in their educational careers. The teacher also has the ability to write recommendations and perhaps even offer employment to certain students in exchange for good performance and compliance.

Finally, apprenticed authority may work well in an adult education setting given that it opens the possibility of authoritative delegation to students. Many students, especially in upper levels in the educational structure, will have a great deal of input on various issues within the educational environment. This will thus facilitate discussion and help students learn from one another. Oftentimes, students learn as much from each other as they do from the professor and his assistants. This greater autonomy afforded to students may also create more creativity and thus allow for a more dynamic and engaging educational environment than a scenario which sees the professor taking a more autocratic role in the classroom.

Adults may have a great degree of referent power, even if they are just students in a classroom. Thus, there is a greater likelihood that students in an adult educational context will derive some power from their community and their classmates. Given this fact, the teacher should orient himself in a way that respects the power of the adults in his class and defer to them in cases where it is appropriate. This is not to say that teachers should give their rewards-based power over to students, as this could lead to a degradation in the classroom's structure and students could question why they are taking orders from the teacher to begin with (Merriam, 2014).

5. Conclusion

Adult education is far different from primary and secondary education, and thus requires that teachers assume a role that is less interventionist and where teachers are more willing to grant autonomy to their students. Adult students need guides on the side who they can learn and grow from. They want to be able to express themselves on their own terms and are not necessarily looking for a person to emulate in the same way that teachers might want. Thus, it is my recommendation that teachers in adult education pursue power that is rewards and expert-based, as well as authority that is noninterventionist, internationalist, goal-oriented, and apprenticed authority types.

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