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Original article

The construction of teacher authority in the school context: a case study

La construcción de la autoridad docente en el contexto escolar: un estudio de caso

A construção da autoridade docente no contexto escolar: um estudo de caso

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to analyze how teacher authority is constructed within the school context of an educational institution. The paradigm employed was interpretive, with a qualitative approach focused on participants' reflections on their own experiences. The design was a case study, aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of a specific reality. The setting was the Faculty of Education at a public university in Metropolitan Lima. Semi-structured interviews and participant observation were used; two teachers, four students, and two experts participated. The results showed that the teacher's attitude, expressed through interest in learning, kindness, and cordial treatment, is the most influential factor in the recognition of authority. Subject matter expertise and the use of teaching strategies also play a significant role, while firmness occupies a secondary position. It is concluded that teacher authority is not imposed, but rather constructed from personal, pedagogical, and relational attributes that students value and recognize voluntarily.

Keywords: teacher authority; pedagogical authority; school coexistence; school discipline; teacher attitude.

RESUMEN

El objetivo del estudio fue analizar la forma en que se construye la autoridad docente en el contexto escolar de una institución educativa. El paradigma empleado fue el interpretativo, con enfoque cualitativo centrado en la reflexión de los participantes sobre sus propias experiencias. El diseño corresponde al estudio de caso, orientado a la comprensión en profundidad de una realidad concreta. El escenario fue la Facultad de Educación de una universidad pública de Lima Metropolitana. Se emplearon la entrevista semiestructurada y la observación participante; participaron dos docentes, cuatro estudiantes y dos expertos. Los resultados evidenciaron que la actitud docente, expresada en el interés por el aprendizaje, la amabilidad y el trato cordial, constituye el factor de mayor influencia en el reconocimiento de la autoridad. El dominio de la asignatura y el empleo de estrategias didácticas también intervienen de manera significativa, mientras que el carácter firme ocupa un papel secundario. Se concluye que la autoridad docente no se impone, sino que se construye a partir de atributos personales, pedagógicos y relacionales que el estudiantado valora y reconoce de forma voluntaria.

Palabras clave: autoridad docente; autoridad pedagógica; convivencia escolar; disciplina escolar; actitud docente.

RESUMO

O objetivo deste estudo foi analisar como a autoridade docente é construída no contexto escolar de uma instituição de ensino. O paradigma empregado foi o interpretativo, com abordagem qualitativa focada nas reflexões dos participantes sobre suas próprias experiências. O delineamento corresponde a um estudo de caso, visando obter uma compreensão aprofundada de uma realidade específica. O cenário foi a Faculdade de Educação de uma universidade pública da região metropolitana de Lima. Foram utilizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas e observação participante; participaram dois professores, quatro alunos e dois especialistas. Os resultados mostraram que a atitude do professor, expressa no interesse pela aprendizagem, na gentileza e no tratamento cordial, constitui o fator mais influente no reconhecimento da autoridade. O domínio da matéria e o uso de estratégias de ensino

também desempenham um papel significativo, enquanto um caráter firme ocupa uma posição secundária. Conclui-se que a autoridade docente não é imposta, mas sim construída a partir de atributos pessoais, pedagógicos e relacionais que os alunos valorizam e reconhecem voluntariamente.

Palavras-chave: autoridade docente; autoridade pedagógica; convivência escolar; disciplina escolar; atitude docente.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher authority is a central component of school life, although its nature and the conditions under which it is exercised have been widely debated. Pace and Hemmings (2007), in a comprehensive review of theories, ideologies, and research on classroom authority, point out that it is a fundamental but frequently misunderstood element, whose quality directly impacts teaching, learning, and the quality of pedagogical relationships. This academic consensus contrasts with the daily experience of many teachers, who report increasing difficulties in maintaining their authority with the class.

The student movement of May 1968 marked a turning point in this relationship. Since then, pedagogical authority has been progressively questioned, and indiscipline, disrespect, and difficulties in maintaining school order have become recurring problems in various educational systems (Hidalgo Montesinos, 2021; Zamora & Alfaro, 2020). Tallone (2011) describes this process as the loss of the tacit social consensus that placed teachers in a position of unquestioned authority, which now forces teachers to seek new ways to legitimize themselves in the eyes of their students.

In Spain, Merma-Molina and Gavilán-Martín (2019) documented that more than 65% of teachers acknowledge difficulties in teaching due to disruptive behavior. In Latin America, research conducted in Chile and Mexico confirms that the relationship between teachers and students is frequently conflictive and that the recognition of teacher authority cannot be taken for granted (Meza-Pardo *et al.*, 2020; Zamora & Alfaro, 2020). Zamora-Poblete *et al.* (2015), in characterizing the most authoritative teachers from the perspective of Chilean students from different socioeconomic groups, found that recognition is directed toward those who combine mastery of the subject matter with the establishment of relationships of trust and respect with students.

From a theoretical perspective, the crisis of authority stems from diverse factors: historical, cultural, and ideological. Arendt (2018) argues that authority is neither equivalent to imposition nor persuasion, but rather occupies an intermediate space that demands voluntary recognition. Kojeve (2006) emphasizes that where there is coercion, there can be no genuine authority. Dubet (2006), in turn, points out that today, simply holding a position is no longer enough to exercise authority: it must be continuously legitimized through performance and the quality of interactions with students.

In the educational institutions of Metropolitan Lima, the situation does not differ from the international context. The lack of recognition of teaching authority affects school coexistence and by extension the learning process. However, in the Peruvian context there are few studies that address this problem directly.

The design followed is appropriate for the study of teacher authority, since it allows capturing the uniqueness of pedagogical practices in their real context, as Meza *et al.* (2015) point out, when proposing observation criteria to understand pedagogical authority in its concrete exercise.

The objective of this study was to analyze how teacher authority is constructed in a specific educational institution, paying attention to three dimensions: mastery of the subject, the teacher's character, and their attitude towards students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Paradigm and approach

The paradigm for this research was interpretive. From this perspective, reality is constructed by the subjects themselves in their interaction with the environment, so multiple versions of the same reality can coexist. The approach was qualitative, oriented toward a deep understanding of the experiences and meanings that the participants attribute to teacher authority.

Design

The design followed a case study approach, which allows for addressing the phenomenon in its complexity with a small sample, prioritizing depth over generalizable results. The case study focused on the Faculty of Education at a public university in Metropolitan Lima.

Participants

The sample was purposive and based on criteria of cultural, not statistical, representativeness. Eight informants participated, distributed as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Research participants

Code	Profile	Selection criteria
E1 to E4	Students (4)	Upper years of secondary education, middle class background
D1 and D2	Teachers (2)	Recognized as an authority through an anonymous survey among their students
X1 and X2	Experts (2)	Specialists in education and university pedagogy

Note: The selected teachers were previously identified through an anonymous survey administered to their students

Techniques and instruments

Two data collection techniques were used. Semi-structured interviews provided information on participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings regarding teacher authority; these interviews were recorded and transcribed in their entirety. Participant observation consisted of direct attendance at selected teachers' class sessions, with systematic recording of findings in a field journal. The instruments used were an interview guide, developed based on the specific research objectives, and the field journal.

Data analysis

Once the data were collected, the interviews were transcribed, the units of analysis were coded, and the data were categorized. Source triangulation was applied, comparing the observation results with the testimonies of students, teachers, and experts, to ensure the internal validity of the findings. The criteria for scientific rigor followed were credibility, auditability, and transferability.

Ethical aspects

Written informed consent was obtained from teachers and, in the case of students under the age of 18, from their parents or guardians. The confidentiality and anonymity of all participants were

guaranteed throughout the process. The research adhered to the principles of beneficence, justice, and respect for intellectual property.

RESULTS

The results are organized according to the three a priori subcategories of the research, summarized in table 2.

Table 2. Prior categories and subcategories

Category	Subcategories	Sources of information
Teaching authority	Mastery of the subject	Observation, interviews, document review
	Character	Observation, interviews with students and teachers
	Teaching attitude	Observation, interviews, expert testimonies

Note: Defined based on the theoretical framework prior to fieldwork

Mastery of the subject

Classroom observations revealed that both teachers demonstrated adequate knowledge of the subject matter, both in their presentations and in answering questions. The four students interviewed confirmed that their teachers were knowledgeable about the course content. However, the experts emphasized that disciplinary knowledge alone is not enough to earn students' respect. Expert 2 stated: "It does not just about know, but about how I teach; it has to do with pedagogy, with the use of techniques and strategies to develop competencies." This distinction between knowing what to teach and knowing how to teach it is recurrent in the specialized literature. Zamora-Poblete *et al.* (2015) noted that students from different socioeconomic groups recognize authority in teachers who are able to translate their knowledge into learning experiences that are understandable and relevant to their everyday lives.

Teaching character

In both observed cases, classroom order was maintained naturally, without resorting to hierarchical or coercive measures. The students described their relationship with their teachers as predominantly horizontal. Student E2 noted: "At times, in the vocabulary, in the way we treat each other, it seems

like we are equals." The experts did not identify a firm character as an explicitly determining factor; however, expert 1 cautioned that complicity or excessive humor from the outset can weaken authority if it is not supported by other attributes.

Teaching attitude

This subcategory was the most highly valued by all participants. Classroom observations confirmed that both teachers maintain a close relationship with their students, calling them by name, patiently answering their questions, and demonstrating explicit interest in their learning. The students unanimously highlighted the teachers' kindness, willingness to answer questions, and commitment. Student E1 stated, "He's concerned that we understand the information," and student E2 added that teacher 1 even offers tutoring outside of class time. The experts agreed that closeness, interest, and a caring approach are crucial for students to willingly acknowledge the teacher's authority.

Emerging factors

The analysis revealed factors not considered in the initial design: institutional backing and faculty support. Expert 1 pointed out that authority should not be centered on the individual but rather anchored in the institution, and that collegial support is fundamental, especially for beginning teachers. Expert 2 highlighted social recognition and collaborative work among educators as elements that contribute to building authority in the medium term.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm and expand upon the results of previous research on the construction of teacher authority. Regarding subject matter expertise, the results are consistent with those of Merma-Molina and Gavilán-Martín (2019) and Meza-Pardo *et al.* (2020), who indicate that disciplinary knowledge and the use of teaching strategies are recognized by students as constitutive attributes of authority. Harjunen (2009) found that teachers themselves conceive of their pedagogical authority as something built through daily interaction with students, based on mutual trust and shared responsibility, rather than as an attribute derived from their position or institutional hierarchy. The experts consulted in this study add that disciplinary knowledge must be complemented by the ability to teach it in a comprehensible and relevant manner, which is consistent with the arguments of Zamora and Alfaro (2020) and with the data collected by Zamora-Poblete *et al.* (2015) in different socioeconomic groups in Chile.

Regarding the nature of the relationship, the results show that a horizontal dynamic predominates between teachers and students in the cases studied. Harjunen (2009), in a study with Finnish teachers, found that pedagogical authority is built through daily interaction and that the teachers themselves conceive of it as a relational achievement rather than a condition imposed by their role. This finding aligns with the data obtained in this study, where no teacher resorted to verticality as a central strategy. Meza-Pardo *et al.* (2017), based on interviews with Chilean teachers recognized as authorities by their students, identified seven hypotheses about the construction of pedagogical authority; among them, that this construction is gradual and is strengthened by the accumulation of experience and critical reflection on one's own practice. From a theoretical perspective, Arendt (2018) and Kojeve (2005) agree that violence or coercion are not valid instruments of authority but rather their antithesis.

The most significant finding is the centrality of the teacher's attitude in the construction of authority. This finding is consistent with that of Gil-Madrona *et al.* (2021), who applied the Scale of Meanings of Pedagogical Authority (ESAPA) to 916 Ibero-American students and found that closeness and empathy received the highest scores as constitutive traits of authority. Similarly, Merma-Molina and Gavilán-Martín (2019) and Zamora and Alfaro (2020) confirm that the teacher's relational attitude, expressed in interest, trust, and personalized attention, is the quality that most influences the recognition of pedagogical authority. Pace and Hemmings (2007) emphasize that authority in the classroom cannot be reduced to a set of control techniques, but rather is the result of daily negotiations between teachers and students around shared educational goals.

From a conceptual framework, Dubet (2006) argues that authority is no longer legitimized by position, but must be earned through performance and the quality of relationships. Tallone (2011) points out that today's teachers face the challenge of building their legitimacy in social conditions that no longer guarantee automatic recognition; authority, in this sense, becomes a relational achievement and not a prerequisite. Bourdieu and Passeron (1996) already warned that pedagogical authority requires supporting institutional conditions; today, in the era of postmodernity and the fluidity of reference points, these conditions are much more unstable.

Among the limitations of this study is its scope as a single case study, which restricts the possibility of generalization. The conclusions reached here are transferable to contexts with similar characteristics, but are not intended to have universal value. Future research should expand the

sample to other institutional contexts and educational levels, and incorporate the impact of digital technologies and artificial intelligence on the reconfiguration of the teacher's role.

It is concluded that teacher authority is not imposed, but rather built gradually through the interaction of pedagogical, personal, and relational attributes. The teacher's attitude, expressed in their interest, empathy, and commitment to student learning, is the most decisive factor in the voluntary recognition of that authority.

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Conflict of interest

Authors declare no conflict of interests.

Authors' contribution

The authors participated in the design and writing of the article, in the search and analysis of the information contained in the consulted bibliography.

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