

## Power in the Classroom and Pupil's Achievement in Secondary Schools: the Case of Masvingo District, Zimbabwe

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**Abstract:** *The study sought to examine power dynamics that are used regularly in secondary schools by teachers and the relationship between teacher power use and academic achievement. This study adopted the descriptive survey design which employs qualitative approach. A sample size of 35 subjects was drawn. Questionnaire, interview and focus group discussion methods were used to collect data from respondents. It was found that pupil learning suffers due to oppressive and restrictive power atmospheres in secondary schools. Findings of the study further revealed that, shifting of power in favour of pupils is a strategy for pupil achievement. This study recommends a reciprocal power relationship with pupils in the classroom, in which pupils and teachers share control of the learning environment and that teachers should employ a number of strategies that help pupils to gain power in the classroom.*

**Keywords:** *power, power dynamics, pupil achievement, reciprocal power.*

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe, although the education system has been undergoing rapid change in the last several years through new modes of learning that have been espoused and new communication strategies that have been encouraged as alternative methods to the traditional view of education, some teachers in secondary schools still hold the traditional view of education that learners must submit themselves to teachers and that teachers' authority should not be questioned. As a result these teachers are becoming oppressive and arbitrary. Under these rather oppressive and restrictive power atmospheres in secondary schools, it is not surprising that pupil learning suffers. It is against this background that the researcher thought it necessary to explore the relationship between teacher power use and pupil achievement in secondary schools.

Research studies on power in the classroom, (French & Raven 1968, Cheng 1994, Taylor 1988, Richardson, Cook & Macke 1980, Richmond & McCroskey 2012) have taken a narrower view of the process, focusing on the teacher as a power figure to the virtual exclusion of pupil power in the classroom. Furthermore, most of the above research studies on power in the classroom are dated, hence the need for current studies on power in the classroom and pupil achievement. Some studies, (Richmond & McCroskey 2012, Bernstein 2000, Gore 1998) have focused on teachers "power bases" including their coercive, reward, legitimate, referent and expert as being crucial to understand classroom relationships and pupil achievement. The popularity of pupil-centred approaches in Zimbabwe seems to suggest a shift of power in favour of pupils. It is against this issue that the researcher thought it necessary to explore the relationship between

reciprocal power relationship in the classroom and pupil achievement. There is dearth of information on pupil power in the classroom and pupil achievement, hence the need for this research study.

## **2.0 POWER DYNAMICS IN THE CLASSROOM: An overview.**

This study examines the different power dynamics that exist in the classroom at secondary level. There are different power dynamics that include coercive, reward, legitimate, referent and expert powers. Each of these power dynamics are unpacked below. A conceptualization of the term power is necessary before venturing into power dynamics and their implications on pupil achievement. Power is a term commonly employed in a wide variety of academic disciplines and as a result, the constituent definitions of the term are far from consistent from one discipline to another or even within a given discipline. According to Balan (2010:56) power is understood as the capacity of an agent to impose the will over the will of the powerless or the ability to force them to do things, they do not wish to do. In this sense, power is understood as something that the institutions possess and use oppressively against individuals and groups. Therefore, power in classroom can be viewed as the capacity of the teacher to influence the pupil to do something he/she would not have done had he/she not influenced by the teacher. In other words the pupil exhibits some type of change in her/his behaviour, attitudes, academic performance, beliefs and many others as a result of the influence from the teacher. However in Foucault's opinion, power is not something that can be owned but rather something that acts and manifests itself in a certain way. It is more strategy than a possession (Gaventa 2003:1). Therefore taking from Foucault's view, power can be analyzed as something which circulates. This means that power does not simply come down from above. Therefore, in the classroom according to Foucault, there should be power sharing between the teacher and the pupils. The exercise of power can be either positive or negative (Kelly 2009:38). Power dynamics that exist in the classroom are discussed below.

### **2.1 Coercive power**

According to Hurt et al (1978) a teacher's coercive power is based on the pupil's expectations that he/she will be punished by the teacher if he/she does not conform to the teacher's influence attempt. Almost similarly Weimer (2009) asserts that pupils respond to the teacher's power because they want to avoid punishment. Ruch (1984) however argues that physical punishment arouses unpleasant emotion in the recipient which usually reduces the efficiency of learning. It is also important however to note that in other environments where very strong peer group pressure against the teacher exists, the teacher may have no coercive power at all, even though the teacher may be in a position to exert a high degree of punishment. Foucault (1980) posits that there can be no power relations without the possibility of resistance. The resistance by pupils would result in the formation of negative pupil-teacher relationships.

## **2.2 Reward power**

According to Weimer (2009) pupils learn quickly that teachers can give them rewards. Such rewards may involve providing something positive. In a classroom teachers can give pupils rewards such as bonus points, extra credit or other forms of positive feedback. These rewards would enable pupils to do what the teacher asks or tells them to do because they are motivated to get these rewards.

## **2.3 Legitimate power**

Legitimate power often is referred to as assigned power, (Hurt et al 1978). This means that it stems from the assigned role of the teacher in the classroom. Hurt et al (1978) add that legitimate power is based on the pupil's perception that the teacher has the right to make certain demands and requests as a function of his/her position as a teacher. In line with this, Weimer (2009) asserts that pupils expect teachers to have some authority over them. This is also confirmed by Gore (1998) who argues that teachers can exercise their power by controlling, regulating and invoking knowledge. Therefore in the classroom, the teacher because of his/her authority determine what pupils will study, what assignments they will complete and what standards they must reach in order to pass and do well, deciding on the information to be given to the class, supervision of the process of creation of knowledge and assessment of the product of knowledge.

## **2.4 Referent power**

The foundation of referent power is the pupil identification with the teacher. This type of power is based on the desire of the less powerful person (the pupil) to identify with and please the more powerful person (teacher) (Hurt et al 1978,). In line with this, Weimer (2009) asserts that pupils do the teachers' bidding because pupils admire the teacher and because pupils identify with the teacher and have positive regard for him/her, they willingly do as the teacher says. In other words, the stronger the pupil's attraction to and identification with the teacher, the stronger the teacher's referent power.

## **2.5 Expert power**

According to Bernstein (2000) power over pupils is assigned to the teacher as expert by virtue of his/her claim to superior knowledge. Bernstein further asserts that the extent to which this power is exercised depends on both how the teacher regard his/her claim to knowledge and his/her conception of teaching. Weimer (2009) confirmed that the power of the teacher comes from his/her knowledge of content and expertise as an educator. Therefore in a classroom, pupils are willingly to do as the teacher says because they recognize that the teacher knows more than they do.

### **3.0 RESEARCH PROBLEM**

In Zimbabwe, despite the popularity of pupil-centred approaches that seem to suggest a shift of power in favour of pupils, some teachers in secondary schools still hold the traditional view of education that learners must submit themselves to teachers and that teachers' authority should not be questioned. Given this fact, this study sought to explore the effects of these oppressive and restrictive power atmospheres on pupils' performance in secondary schools.

### **4.0 METHODS**

This study was guided by 3 research questions and these were:

- What are power dynamics that are used regularly in secondary schools by teachers?
- What is the relationship between teacher power use and pupil achievement?
- How does power sharing in the classroom enhance pupil performance?

#### **4.1 Sample**

This study adopted the descriptive survey design which employs qualitative approach because it is easy to collect a bulk of information within a limited time. This study involved five secondary schools in Masvingo District that were selected at random. Three categories of respondents were involved, that is twenty pupils, ten teachers selected randomly and five school heads that were selected through purposive sampling. These categories were selected because it was assumed that they had rich information pertaining use of power in the classroom. Thus a sample of 35 respondents was made.

#### **4.2 Instruments**

Questionnaire, interview and focus group discussions were the main tools for data collection. Questionnaire containing closed and open ended items were used to collect the required information from teachers. Questionnaires were developed first then they were reviewed by researchers several times, some of the items were added while some were modified or omitted. A pilot study was conducted. Interview method was also used to supplement information from questionnaires. In this study, school heads were interviewed because they were few. Finally, focus group discussion was used to collect required information from secondary school pupils. This is because pupils are likely to express themselves freely when they are in groups.

#### **4.3 Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using content analysis. Researchers extracted the information relating to the critical questions from participants. A thematic approach was adopted in this study. The following themes were used in this study:

- Power dynamics that are used regularly in secondary schools
- Relationship between teacher power use and pupil achievement
- Sharing of power in the classroom

## 5.0 ETHICAL ISSUES

Prior to entering research sites, permission to carry out the study was sought from Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education at district and regional levels and from headmasters of the schools concerned, as well as voluntary informed consent from participants. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants. Participants were informed during research process that they were allowed to withdraw from the study any time. The researchers assured participants that the information collected would be kept confidential and used for the purpose of the study only.

## 6.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings are presented based on research questions, which are: What are power dynamics that are used regularly in secondary schools by teachers? What is the relationship between teacher power use and pupil achievement? How does power sharing in the classroom enhance pupil performance?

### 6.1 Power dynamics that are used regularly in secondary schools by teachers

The purpose of the question was to establish the power dynamics that are used frequently in secondary schools. It was found that the majority of teachers, 87% reported that they used coercive and legitimate powers. One of the teachers expressed his sentiments as follows:

*“It is much harder to teach without using coercive and legitimate powers because pupils are no longer willing to comply unquestioningly, as many pupils were doing in the past. Pupils are now disrespectful and very difficult to teach because they question my decision or refuse my requests.”*

Another teacher had this to say:

*“No matter how much of the other forms of power a teacher possesses, without coercive and legitimate powers, some pupils will take advantage of their freedom to cross lines without concern for penalties.”*

All pupils, 100%, during focus group discussions indicated that they did not prefer coercive and legitimate power bases which their teachers were using frequently in the classrooms. One of the pupils had this to say:

*We are forced to do something we do not like and as a result, our learning suffers under these oppressive and restrictive power uses*

Another pupil expressed her sentiments as follows:

*“I hate coercive and legitimate power bases which most of our teachers are using. These power bases prompt discipline for fear of punishment and cause pupils to stick to the rules for the sake of punishment.”*

School heads confirmed that most of the teachers were using coercive and legitimate power bases in the classroom although they did not prefer these power bases. One of the heads had this to say:

*“Most of my teachers are using coercive and legitimate powers which I would rather not prefer. I believe these power bases demonstrate weaknesses rather than strength on the part of the teacher. It reveals a lack of influential personality which forces such teachers to resort to coercion instead.”*

Results of the study revealed that there was a strong use of coercive and legitimate power bases in secondary schools. There was no relationship of reciprocal power between pupils and teachers. Teachers used coercive and legitimate powers which were negatively associated with poor performance. Similar findings were presented by previous studies for example, (Cothran and Ennis 1997, Weimer 2009). These studies confirmed strong use of coercive and legitimate powers in schools.

## **6.2 The relationship between teacher power use and pupil achievement**

This question sought to find the link between teacher power use and pupil achievement in secondary schools. From the questionnaires, the majority of teachers indicated that although they used coercive and legitimate powers to control pupils in the classroom, the use of expert, referent and reward powers was positively related to pupil achievement. They further pointed out that coercive and legitimate powers were negatively associated with poor performance of pupils. All school heads who were interviewed confirmed that expert, referent and reward powers produced conducive environments for learning and that oppressive and restrictive power atmospheres made pupil learning to suffer. One of the school heads expressed her sentiments as follows:

*“Expert, referent and reward powers serve to enhance pupil learning but coercive and legitimate powers cause pupils to drop out, others engage in even more potentially harmful activities: gang membership, drug and alcohol abuse, violence or sex.”*

The study has indicated strong relationship between teacher power use and pupil achievement in secondary schools. Research has also indicated a connection between the use of coercive and legitimate powers and poor performance of pupils in secondary schools. Findings of the study further revealed that referent, reward and expert power bases enhance learning. In the same vein, findings from a study by (Cheng 1994, Erwin 2004 and Richmond & McCroskey 2012) confirmed that there is strong relationship between teacher power use and pupil achievement.

### 6.3 Power sharing in the classroom and pupil performance

The question sought to establish if sharing of power is a strategy for pupil achievement in secondary schools. During focus group discussions, all pupils, 100%, reported that there should be a power balance between the teachers and pupils in order for them to be successful in school work. Pupils further indicated that the education system in Zimbabwe was taking a narrower view, focusing on the teacher as a power figure to the virtual exclusion of pupil power in the class. One of the pupils expressed his sentiments during focus group discussions as follows:

*“We are experiencing uncomfortable moments regarding how the power is negotiated by our teacher. We are less committed to high school and less engaged in academic activities if there is no reciprocal power relationship with teachers.”*

Almost similarly, one of the school heads had this to say:

*“In order for pupils to achieve in academic work, there should be a reciprocal power relationship. Teachers should share control of the learning environment with their pupils.”*

All teachers confirmed that sharing of power is a strategy for pupil achievement however they indicated that it was much harder to teach without using coercive and legitimate powers because in the absence of these bases of power, pupils would disrupt the learning environment. Research confirmed that sharing of power is a strategy for pupil achievement in secondary schools in Zimbabwe. Research has also found out that learning was enhanced when pupil and teachers shared control of the learning environment. The findings from this research echo, Cothran and Ennis (1997), Erwin(2004) and McCroskey and Richmond (2012) who revealed that sharing of power is a strategy for pupil achievement. These studies confirmed that pupils are likely to be successful if they share control of the learning environment with their teachers.

### 7.0 CONCLUSION

The researcher has reached the following conclusions: the majority of teachers in secondary schools are strongly using coercive and legitimate powers. It was further established that under these oppressive and restrictive power atmospheres, pupil learning suffers. The researcher also confirmed that there is a strong relationship between teacher power use and pupil achievement. It was revealed in this study that the use of coercive and legitimate powers is associated with pupils drop out, drug and alcohol abuse, violence or sex, which would result in poor performance of the pupils. This study further revealed that the teacher use of expert, referent and reward powers is strongly linked to pupil achievement. Lastly the study established that sharing of power is strategy for pupil achievement. Pupils are likely to do well if there is a reciprocal power relationship in the classroom in which pupils and the teacher share control of the learning environment.

## 8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings of the study on power use in the classroom and pupil achievement, the following recommendations are made to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, other responsible authorities, education officers, school heads and teachers.

- The study recommends that courses should be held for teachers to train them on power bases and their effects on pupil learning.
- There should be a reciprocal power relationship in the classroom in which pupils and teachers share control of the learning environment.
- Pupils should have influence on class processes and decisions.
- Teachers should employ a number of strategies that help pupils gain power in the school.

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