



The Complexities of Authority in the Classroom: Fostering Democracy for Student Learning

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Book Review:

The Complexities of Authority in the Classroom: Fostering Democracy for Student Learning

Edited by Ken Badley and Margaretta Patrick

Routledge Press, 2022, 304 pages

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The Complexities of Authority in the Classroom: Fostering Democracy for Student Learning has been edited by two pre-service educators, Ken Badley and Margaretta Patrick. Their years of experience observing, working, and teaching as pre-service educators in the classroom are evident in the selection of essays in the book. As noted throughout the anthology, the struggle for classroom management and strong teaching presence often has to do with power balance. Over the course of 25 chapters, separated into four sections, the reader will hear from 28 authors from a variety of backgrounds who are in education on how to navigate classroom complexities. While there is a failure to engage fully with significant ideologies, such as anti-racist frameworks, *The Complexities of Authority in the Classroom* provides a comprehensive overview of different dynamics in classrooms, and educators of various backgrounds offer strategies for creating a caring classroom culture as an alternative to imbalanced power dynamics.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide context for the rest of the book by discussing various forms of classroom authority and the history of classroom management. Starting with an explanation of four misunderstandings about authority and ending with an outline of the book's structure, these two chapters explain the need for and purpose of the book.

Part 1, titled "Gaining Classroom Authority," encompasses Chapters 3 through 9 and offers details and examples of authority. For example, Chapter 3, "Authorizing Yourself to Teach," explains that although an educator may gain all the formal credentials to teach, as a teacher, they now need to have courage, the right attitude, and the proper disposition to have self-authorization. Chapter 3 refers to films such as *Mona Lisa* and *School of Rock* as examples of teacher courage, how the teachers in those films authorize themselves, and what that authorization looks and feels

like. Building on Chapter 3, Chapter 4 stresses the importance of moral goodness in order to gain student consent to teach. Chapter 5 explores the concept and importance of presence and looks at some typical characterizations of teacher types in films, including those that should be avoided, such as the “dead teacher” or the “scary teacher.” This is followed by an identification of some of the ideal characteristics of teacher presence. Chapter 6, titled “The Important Impact of Listening Well,” invites us to remain curious about what ideas might emerge as the student and educator engage in active listening. The reader is reminded that listening is a relational act.

Part 2, “Authorizing Students,” begins with Chapter 10, which emphasizes the importance of co-creating a caring classroom with students. The rest of the chapters in this part discuss the importance and centrality of using pedagogical and assessment strategies to build student relationships, which requires earning students’ respect and treating them with dignity. Part 2 reminds the reader that students need to be involved in the process of building classroom culture.

Part 3 explores issues of gender, equity, and diversity and is titled “Teacher Authority and Diversity.” Chapters 15 through 19 share scenarios regarding equity issues in classrooms that educators should consider. Scholar Bettina Love (2020)—an award-winning author and the William F. Russell Professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, whose work focuses on transforming education through anti-racism, abolitionist teaching, Black joy, and educational reparations—reminds us that when teaching racialized children, “a truthful, equitable and culturally appropriate education is understood to be a basic human right” (p. 105). In Chapter 15, Patrick reiterates this thinking. She writes,

Culturally responsive teaching requires a rejection of deficit explanations for why some students do not flourish in school, an embrace of cultural diversity, and a belief that culture brings vitality into a classroom and provides an entryway to learning. If teachers show openness to learning about their students, provide a warm and safe learning environment in which all students know that they belong and matter, and maintain high expectations for all, students will learn and, one hopes, flourish. On the flip side, if teachers do not acknowledge the cultural norms embedded in many behavioral expectations and rules, do not provide a warm environment, do not teach about power, and do not engage with cultural literacy, they will lose authority in the classroom. (p. 171)

While this quote is an example of the discussions on culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) in Part 3, this section could also use some discussion of anti-racism and anti-oppressive approaches for educators to keep in mind while trying to maintain classroom authority. For example, a discussion of intersectionality and some historical context regarding why racialized educators should be hired would be beneficial. No racial category is a monolith, and hiring teachers from marginalized communities is equally important to “acknowledg[ing] that conversations about race and authority are complex and multi-faceted” (p. 201). They are interrelated issues that require critical analysis. CRP, while important, is a piece of a much larger puzzle. For example, Chapter 15 calls on educators to be culturally relevant and responsive teachers while also being warm demanders. Bondy and Ross (2008) explain that the term “warm demander,” coined by Judith Kleinfeld, calls on educators to maintain high-level expectations while creating a warm classroom environment and building strong relationships with students (p. 55). Chapter 18 considers the nuances of having more diverse teachers, with the author, Malini Sivasubramaniam, writing the following:

While increasing the number of racialized educators visibly increases diversity and representation in schools and classrooms and helps to build rapport with students and families, in and of itself such an increase does not necessarily translate into more effective

teaching. Nor does it give due credence to the multiplicity of teacher social identities that shape their teaching. The reality, however, is that having the same or a similar background to the children is not a sufficient condition for winning their respect or gaining recognition as a “role model.” (p. 207)

Sivasubramaniam further writes that “instead of trying to create race-based role models, it is more important to acknowledge that conversations about race and authority are complex and multifaceted” (p. 201). This positioning on hiring racialized educators, while making a valid point on the requirement for teacher training, also raises two concerns. First, it is somewhat careless to propose that race-based hiring on its own is ineffectual; there is a systemic problem in education of people of colour not being hired as teachers, and administrators can use this sentiment as an excuse to perpetuate that deficiency by insisting on exclusionary hiring practices as long as teachers of the dominant group are trained on CRP. Second, of course, teachers hired on the basis of racial equity need training just as white teachers do, but the wording of Sivasubramaniam's chapter diminishes the importance of racial representation in the classroom altogether. CRP is an asset-based approach and is part of a larger anti-racist effort, but it does not necessarily explore ways to combat racism—that is, it does not provide an anti-racist framework to fight systemic oppression—which she fails to fully acknowledge. Anti-racism is the process of unlearning. In this chapter, there is no discussion of the inherent and subconscious racial and/or cultural biases a teacher may have toward students with different racial backgrounds and how the teacher can address these biases.

It is a great oversight to discuss CRP and teacher authority without acknowledging and exploring the importance and necessity of an anti-racist and anti-oppressive framework. Such a framework, combined with other-equity related ideologies, such as anti-racism, both addresses and disrupts discriminatory behaviours and systemic barriers. If a teacher does not understand anti-oppression or that racism is inherent in the school system structure, this lack of understanding only serves to perpetuate these harmful cycles at an institutional level.

Part 4 concludes with a section titled “Misperceptions About Teacher Authority.” Chapters 19 through 25 share reflections from educators at various stages of their careers. Chapter 21, for example, focuses on the experiences of a teacher teaching abroad. Nicola Campbell, the author of this chapter, recalls that navigating policies while trying to establish her own teaching identity in a new setting was intimidating and rewarding (p. 229). Campbell says she needed to let go of some of her existing values to adapt to the new teaching context abroad and explains that she also gained some values, including taking a collaborative approach to teaching, that she was able to implement usefully when she returned to education in Canada. She further explores how teaching abroad can force a teacher to discover their established values and then organically challenge them, abandoning those that do not suit the context while simultaneously acquiring new tools, values, and approaches that may continue to be effective when the teacher returns to their home country in an educational capacity.

The strength of *The Complexities of Authority in Classroom: Fostering Democracy for Student Learning* lies in its sharing of personal anecdotes, research, and examples in different educational landscapes that are founded on equitable and inclusive teaching practices and so effectively present the reader with various ways to obtain and reform teacher authority. This book is recommended for teacher candidates and all teachers at different stages of their careers. Readers of this book will have a variety of theories, methods, and stories to guide them in their daily practice as educators in the classroom.

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