

Rationalisation of Teacher Authority: Rethinking Teachers' Authority in a Democratic Classroom

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Abstract

This article explores how concepts of authority are interpreted and potentially distorted into authoritarianism in schools. Authoritarian practices during apartheid included the widespread use of corporal punishment to assert dominance and suppress dissent. Section 10 of the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 expressly forbids the use of corporal punishment in schools. However, research suggests that many teachers struggle to balance firm classroom control and avoid authoritarian tendencies; confusing authority with authoritarianism makes some teachers hesitant to manage their classrooms effectively. This qualitative case study investigates the puzzle of authority in the post-apartheid classroom; data were collected from documents, nine teachers, and observation. The findings reveal that experienced teachers demonstrate greater conceptual clarity regarding authority than novice teachers. Experienced teachers understand how to exercise authority effectively, while some novices confuse it with authoritarianism, making classroom management a challenge. The findings suggest that teachers can envision classroom leadership that redefines teacher authority beyond punitive control mechanisms. The article develops a philosophical perspective and conceptual structure to rethink classroom discipline, positioning teacher authority outside the confines of punitive control.

Keywords: apartheid; authority; authoritarian; discipline; rationalisation



International Journal of Educational Development in Africa
#21048 | 20 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2312-3540/21048>

ISSN 2312-3540 (Online)

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Introduction

Authority is described as the power to create opinions, give counsel, issue commands, and enforce rules (Shaikhmag, Naidoo, and Pelser 2020; Venkataramani 2012). In other words, those in authority possess the legitimate power to decide, declare, and direct within established procedures. Another lens through which to view authority is the possession of expertise within a particular domain (Shaikhmag, Naidoo, and Pelser 2020; Vukadinovi and Njegovan 2011). Similarly, authority is an aspect of leadership inherent in parenting—guiding learners, fostering adherence to direction, and gradually transferring greater autonomy as they mature and become responsible (Venkataramani 2012). Following the democratic transition in 1994, legislation prohibited corporal punishment and introduced alternative disciplinary approaches in schools (Republic of South Africa 1996). Nevertheless, many South African schools continue to grapple with persistent discipline challenges. The prohibition of corporal punishment signals a shift away from authoritarian models of discipline. Many teachers find it challenging to assert authority without appearing authoritarian following the abolition of corporal punishment (Shaikhmag, Naidoo, and Pelser 2020; Shaikhmag, Assan, and Naidoo 2021), often conflating the two and hesitating to enforce discipline effectively (Egunlusi 2020; Kennedy 1998). Teachers' hesitation to discipline learners may inadvertently foster a culture of indiscipline (Jinot 2018). Challenges in classroom management have negatively impacted teacher morale and enthusiasm. Some teachers leave the profession owing to the disapproval they encounter when adopting alternative disciplinary methods (Egunlusi 2020; Shaikhmag, Naidoo, and Pelser 2020; Venkataramani 2012). Others continue to grapple with the challenge of managing discipline effectively (Egunlusi 2025). Yet the task remains: teachers must embody authority without slipping into authoritarianism. In this study, authority is framed as a balance of command, expertise, and dignity. Authority, as part of leadership, entails guiding learners' lives and fostering responsibility through adherence to direction (Venkataramani 2012). This prompts questions about whether teachers can manage classrooms where authority is respected, and whether they recognise their legitimate authority. The study examines two tensions: the confusion between authority and authoritarianism (Egunlusi 2020; Kennedy 1998), and the challenge of exercising authority outside punishment-based approaches (Egunlusi 2020; Shaikhmag, Naidoo, and Pelser 2020; Venkataramani 2012). By rationalising their authority in the pursuit of discipline, teachers may reduce the persistent problem of indiscipline in South African schools. Hansen (2001) argues that organisations grounded solely in charismatic authority lack long-term stability and must either adopt legal-rational authority or blend both forms to achieve institutional coherence. This article examines the complexities of authority within the post-apartheid classroom, aiming to deepen understanding of how teachers can exercise authority outside the authoritarian paradigm.

Literature Review

Authority and Authoritarian Mode of Discipline

The growing prevalence of indiscipline in schools has been linked to the ban on corporal punishment and the inadequacy of substitute disciplinary strategies (Egunlusi 2025; Khewu 2012; Moyo, Khewu, and Bayaga 2014; Venter and Van Niekerk 2011). Many teachers struggle to enforce these alternatives, believing that the ban has fostered learner disrespect and disobedience (Segalo and Rambuda 2018; Shaikhang, Assan, and Naidoo 2021; Smit 2013; Venkataramani 2012). In the post-apartheid era, declining respect for teachers has fuelled conflict and discipline problems (Shaikhnag, Naidoo, and Pelsers 2020; Smit 2013). Since schools depend on mutual respect between teachers and learners, educators often struggle to balance authority with constructive relationships (Venkataramani 2012). This challenge reflects broader tensions, as teachers attempt to move beyond traditional methods while avoiding authoritarianism. The growing disregard for authority among learners is often attributed to the abolition of corporal punishment, which has fostered the perception that teachers no longer have authority, as such authority is now associated with abuse and repression (Shaikhang, Assan, and Naidoo 2021). Kennedy (1998) notes that apartheid's legacy left authority itself tainted by hatred and fear. Kennedy puts it this way:

In our haste to free ourselves from the restriction of the past, we now find ourselves in a position where we are in danger of throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. However, we will have to retrieve our baby called authority in our schooling system if schooling is to fulfill its main educative function. It is a choice we have to make if schooling is to be effective. (Kennedy 1998, 92)

Proponents argue that banning corporal punishment has eroded learners' respect for authority and undermined teachers' authority (Shaikhnag, Naidoo, and Pelsers 2020). As such, the position of authority, which learners are expected to acknowledge and which is essential for effective teaching, often becomes a contentious issue, particularly as teachers must navigate it within diverse classroom contexts (Shaikhang, Assan, and Naidoo 2021). For effective teaching, teachers must exercise their authority without being authoritarian (Egunlusi 2020). Learners' relationships with teachers have a strong influence on their capacity to learn (Hargreaves, Elhawaryb, and Mahgoubc 2018). Yet, some teachers hesitate to build close ties, fearing it may weaken their authority (Mashau, Mutshaeni, and Kone 2015). Unhealthy teacher–learner relationships often undermine discipline (Nwobodo 2018), whereas cordial, caring interactions foster a supportive learning environment (Egeberg and McConney 2018). Some teachers equate authority with authoritarianism. Hirst and Peters (1970) argue that authority becomes authoritarian when serving personal interests, but when directed toward educational goals, it is rationalised. In post-apartheid schools, such rationalisation is vital for teacher-learner relations. Kennedy (1998) describes legal-rational authority as deliberate and reasoned, while Coleman (1997), drawing on Weber, notes the shift from traditional to rational-legal authority in modernity, which Hirst and Peters (1970) view

as the progressive conception of the teacher as a child grower. From this perspective, teachers are urged to exercise authority thoughtfully to promote constructive classroom change.

Rationalisation of Teacher's Authority

This article engages with Max Weber's typology of authority and incorporates Hirst and Peters's (1970) rationalisation of teachers' authority. Weber (1958) identified three types of authority: traditional authority, legal-rational authority, and charismatic authority.

Coleman (1997, 35) contends that traditional authority is inherently conservative and lacks the internal drive necessary to propel social change. Traditional authority is characterised by elements such as familiarity, social esteem, rigid categorisation, habitual practices, and adherence to longstanding customs (Njegovan, Vukadinović, and Nešić 2011; Vukadinović and Njegovan 2011), and tends to be "patrimonial, feudal, and monarchical-bureaucratic" (Coleman 1997, 35). Teachers who rely on traditional authority often assume that their position alone warrants unquestioned acceptance from learners.

Charismatic authority is defined by traits such as evolving dignity, personal magnetism, dependability, and resolute commitment (Njegovan et al. 2011; Vukadinović and Njegovan 2011). Charismatic authority rests on the exceptional wisdom or sacred endowments of an individual whose purpose is to safeguard the well-being of their followers (Coleman 1997). As such, "effective teaching can only take place with learners' cooperation" (Egunlusi 2020, 8). Without followers, a charismatic leader remains disconnected from historical relevance and unable to effect meaningful social change (Coleman 1997). Unsurprisingly, Iwuh (2012) observes that organisations rooted in charismatic authority often require transformation into a more stable form to ensure longevity.

Rational-legal authority is based on formal rules, due process, and democratic principles that support learners (Shaikhmag, Naidoo, and Pelsner 2020; Venkataramani 2012). Rational-legal authority is distinguished by its exclusivity, credibility, and pervasive legitimacy (Vukadinović and Njegovan 2011; Njegovan et al. 2011). In other words, rational-legal authority derives from formal rules and the legitimate right of those in higher positions to issue directives. Rational-legal authority emphasises efficiency and the logical alignment of means with intended outcomes (Coleman 1997), distinguishing itself from traditional authority by enabling social transformation. Adherents of rational-legal authority prioritise compliance with established rules over personal discretion. The analytic precision of legal and rational authority is crucial in this study. Rational authority reflects the holder's technical competence and effective use of power (Bower 1971), while legal authority derives from normative or institutional structures (Hansen 2001). Legal authority defines the formal boundaries of office, whereas rational authority depends on the capacity to act effectively and pragmatically. Legal authority

legitimises the office holder, and rational authority ensures authority is exercised reasonably. In South Africa, teacher authority shifted from traditional to rational-legal forms in the move from apartheid to post-apartheid discipline. Alternatives to corporal punishment, legally sanctioned, require discipline to be administered with clear justification. As part of democratisation, schools must design codes of conduct aligned with the Constitution and their mission; where absent, provincial or national guidelines apply (Department of Education 2000; Government of South Africa 2024). Teachers must therefore ask whether disciplinary measures comply with the school code and serve their intended purpose.

Hirst and Peters (1970) distinguish between traditional authority, focused on content, and progressive authority, centred on child development. Traditional authority, evident in apartheid-era discipline, often fostered authoritarian practices. In the post-apartheid context, a shift toward rational-legal authority is necessary, where teachers exercise power for the benefit of learners (Coleman 1997). This aligns with the progressive view of teachers as “child growers.” Effective discipline requires legitimate authority to control learners, but its value depends on the methods used, whether constructive or punitive. Control in this context involves guiding and supervising learners, not suppressing or harming them. Baumrind (2013) identified four parenting styles shaped by two dimensions: control (or demand) and warmth (or nurture). According to Walker (2009), control involves enforcing appropriate behaviour, while warmth reflects responsiveness to a child’s needs. Baumrind (2013, 11) further distinguishes between authority and authoritarian approaches: “Authority is high on warmth and high on control, while authoritarian is low on warmth and high on control.” To promote good behaviour, teachers must strike a balance between authority and attentiveness to learners’ needs. Sjurso et al. (2019) contend that authority that is high in control and warmth best supports children’s development. As a supportive structure, such authority enhances academic achievement and equitable learning environments (Graham 2018). Hirst and Peters (1970) argue that the progressive teacher as a “child grower” is preferable to the traditional image of a benevolent despot, where authority serves only status or self-interest. True authority must be rationalised to uphold educational purposes, not personal control. In South Africa, traditional discipline rooted in corporal punishment reflected authoritarian repression (Pitsoe and Letseka 2014). With the shift to alternatives, teachers may exercise rational-legal authority, discipline aimed at learners’ growth and benefit rather than punishment.

Research Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative case study design, centring on a public high school situated in a Cape Town township. At the time of the investigation, the school accommodated 552 learners and 20 teachers, with class sizes ranging from 25 to 35 learners. The learners benefited from relatively small classes held in spacious rooms, complemented by access to laboratories, a well-resourced library, and internet connectivity. The school was chosen for this study owing to the notable academic

successes of its learners, despite being located in a community affected by gang violence and disruptions. This raises important questions: How do teachers in the selected school understand discipline and authority, and the exertion of teacher authority in enabling the school to thrive under such adverse conditions? Accordingly, how do teacher perceive learners' discipline and their authority within the school to maintain order and support learning?

Data Collection

The case study design draws on interviews, observations, and document review. The data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. While the interviews were guided by a set of structured questions, additional unstructured questions emerged during the conversations to elicit more in-depth information. The interviews, which were recorded, involved four novices and five experienced teachers. Participants were coded by number, gender, and experience (e.g., 01FN = participant 01, female, novice). A novice teacher is one entering the profession after training and adapting to a new school context (Naik 2024; Sela and Harel 2019; Zaini and Wahab 2024; Zhong and Craig 2020). Definitions vary: some limit novice status to two years or less (Naik 2024; Makoa and Segalo 2021), others extend it to three years (Ngang and Chan 2015; Sezer 2017). In this article, novice teachers are defined as having between one and three years' experience, while experienced teachers have four or more.

Table 1: Summary of participants

Participants	Participation order	Gender	Role	Years of Experience
A	01	Female	Teacher	1
B	02	Female	Teacher	1.5
C	03	Male	Teacher	2
D	04	Female	Teacher	4
E	05	Female	Teacher	3.5
F	06	Male	Grade Head	39
G	07	Male	Teacher	6
H	08	Male	Teacher	22
I	09	Female	Principal	33

Observations were used to capture the school context as well as the tone, body language, and expressions of the teachers during the interviews, while the documents reviewed included school awards, newspaper articles, and codes of conduct.

Data Analysis

Through an interpretive lens, the study explores how teachers in a selected Cape Town high school understand discipline and authority in the post-corporal punishment classroom. The data were analysed using an inductive thematic approach that identifies patterns and themes directly from the data, producing four key themes: teachers'

perceptions of learner discipline in the school; the disciplinary challenges encountered by the school; the policies implemented to regulate learners' discipline; and teachers' views on their authority in relation to discipline. The first three themes collectively address the puzzle of discipline, while the fourth highlights the puzzle of teachers' authority. For clarity, this article focuses on the fourth theme: how teachers perceive their authority and its relationship to discipline. While the first three themes, already published (Egunlusi 2025), were developed from interviews, observations, and document analysis, the fourth theme draws primarily on interviews and observations to advance the argument concerning teachers' authority in relation to discipline within a democratic classroom. Though distinct, the fourth theme overlapped, with participants' responses addressing teachers' authority, its withdrawal, and re-imagining authority outside the punishment paradigm. Some participants spoke extensively on one or two, while others engaged across all.

Findings

Conceptualisations of Teachers' Authority

The study reveals differing views of authority between experienced and novice teachers, highlighting perspectives beyond punishment. Two conceptions emerged: the teacher as an authority in subject matter and the teacher as an authority in classroom management. Experienced teachers distinguished between these two concepts, while novice teachers equated authority with strictness and control over learners.

Experienced Teachers' Perceptions of Teachers' Authority

The first view is the teacher as an authority, grounded in subject mastery. Without strong content knowledge, teachers risk losing control in the classroom. As one experienced teacher noted, "When learners doubt you, attention becomes a challenge; but mastery earns their faith and respect" (08ME). An experienced teacher emphasised "authority as rooted in subject knowledge and self-presentation" (09FE), while another noted, "It depends on both style and mastery of content" (06ME). To maintain authority, teachers need both subject mastery and effective teaching skills; without them, control is lost. The second view, teacher in authority, emphasises effective classroom control within a democratic setting. Authority, participants noted, depends on qualities such as presence, confidence, communication, and relational skills. As one teacher stated, "Your personality will determine your authority" (06ME). Another added that "confidence and positive relationships enable teachers to exercise authority" (09FE). Teachers should embody key qualities such as confidence, effective communication, and relational competence, expressed with genuine care and compassion.

Novice Teachers' Perceptions of Teachers' Authority

Novice teachers often equated authority with strict control, as one noted: "Authority is having the upper hand to control learners" (01FN). Other novice teachers confused authority with being authoritarian; they viewed the exercise of authority as punishing

learners; they interpreted the term “authority” as inherently authoritarian. When 02FN was asked about her perception of authority, she responded, “No I don’t punish learners, and I am not an authoritarian person.” Another teacher said, “Our hands are tied ... teachers’ authority is weakened by the Department of Education” (03MN), reflecting the common perception that authority is inseparable from punishment. The response prompted me to ask 03MN about the link between authority and punishment: “So do you think teachers’ authority relates or can be linked to punishment?” He answered: “Mostly that is how it’s understood.” Some teachers struggle to assert authority in managing discipline. One novice teacher admitted to resorting to strictness but found it hindered learning (05FN), while another confessed to uncertainty about exercising authority (01FN). Many equate authority with authoritarianism, leading some to avoid it altogether. As 03MN noted, authority is often seen as punishment, weakened by the ban on corporal punishment. Yet others argue that without authority, teaching and learning cannot occur (08ME). Teaching and learning may not be effective if teachers choose to shy away from exercising their authority in the classroom. Why would some teachers choose to shy away from the use of their authority? Why do some teachers withdraw from it? The findings highlight several factors behind this reluctance.

Reluctance in Teachers’ Authority

Ineffective Disciplinary Alternatives and Overwhelming Workload

Some teachers viewed alternatives to corporal punishment as ineffective, leaving them frustrated and helpless after its ban. With a narrow understanding of authority, they assumed that democratic laws favoured learners’ rights over those of teachers. As one participant noted, “Learners become the boss and dictate how the class should be managed” (04FE). Some teachers hesitate to exercise authority owing to subject-matter incompetence and heavy workloads. As one noted, “An incompetent teacher will be undermined ... but if you are competent, you will not be intimidated” (07ME). A lack of teacher expertise often leads to learner misbehaviour, while excessive workload leaves even capable teachers weary and overlooks important issues. “With so much work pressure, you end up ignoring things that need attention” (08ME). Consequently, managing discipline and maintaining authority becomes increasingly difficult.

Professional Life Marked by Apathy and Insecurity

Entering the teaching profession by default is another factor that discourages some teachers from asserting authority. This occurs when individuals accept a teaching position or course of study as an alternative because they were unable to pursue their preferred career or academic path. As one experienced teacher explained: “There is a problem. Some teachers do not enter the field out of interest or passion, but because they could not access other careers or qualify for their chosen course of study” (08ME). Consequently, teachers who join the profession by default often lack genuine commitment, and many struggle to cope with its demands, particularly in relation to classroom management. Finally, insecurity plays a major role. Some teachers feel threatened by learners and withdraw for safety reasons. One teacher recalled, “A learner

threatened to stab me ... in Pretoria, a teacher was beaten over a phone” (04FE). Such incidents create fear, making effective teaching impossible. Authority cannot be sustained through fear or punishment, as one experienced teacher noted: “The old-fashioned methods of corporal punishment are gone” (08ME). The next section examines practical methods for maintaining classroom control beyond punitive approaches.

Teacher’s Authority Outside the Authoritarian Mode of Discipline

How can teachers maintain authority in the classroom while ensuring discipline without relying on punishment, yet still maintain safety?

Teacher Attributes That Inspire and Transform Learners Positively

The study highlights essential qualities: presence, confidence, communication, and relationship skills—expressed with care and respect. As one teacher noted, authority should not mean punishment but rather understanding and relating to learners (07ME). Another emphasised that effective authority depends on how teachers carry themselves, communicate, and connect with learners (08ME). Building rapport and fostering mutual respect are, therefore, central to exercising authority constructively. Another important factor is teachers leading by example. A teacher must be a role model whose words align with actions, allowing learners to absorb values from their lifestyle. Good qualities strengthen authority, and experienced teachers emphasise that setting a positive example is vital for classroom management.

Setting Structured Ground Rules for Efficient Classroom Management

The structural organisation of the school and classroom provides an important means for teachers to exercise authority. Rules must be established not for personal gain, but for the benefit of learners. As one teacher noted, “Teachers lose authority and respect when they fail to set ground rules” (07ME). While teachers hold the authority to create rules, learners’ input should also be considered. As another explained, “If we end up on the same page, we revisit our expectations and review them” (02FN). Learners should also understand the rationale behind classroom rules, as one participant explained: “I do explain why those rules are being given and the reasons for my actions” (01FN). Establishing ground rules enables effective classroom management and supports teaching and learning.

Teacher Competency

Teacher competency is fundamental to effective classroom management and the exercise of authority. As O8ME observed, “Discipline becomes secondary when you are competent in the subject matter and can deliver your lesson effectively.” Competence, defined as the ability to teach successfully and efficiently, is both a necessary and sufficient condition for teachers to be recognised as authority figures. Skilled teachers engage learners more effectively, but this requires continuous learning

and awareness of innovations in their field. As another teacher noted, “Teachers must also be willing to learn. ... You must keep learners glued to the topic so they can concentrate” (07ME). Incompetence often leads to learner misbehaviour, undermining classroom order. Competence must also be paired with thorough lesson planning; well-prepared lessons keep learners engaged throughout and reinforce authority.

Discussion

Teacher’s Authority

Some teachers find it difficult to exercise their authority outside of the punishment paradigm, as evidenced by some scholars who found that some teachers confuse authority with authoritarianism, struggling to move beyond punitive traditions (Kennedy 1998; Shaikhang, Naidoo, and Pelsers 2020; Venkataramani 2012; Venter and Van Niekerk 2011). Novice teachers often confuse “authority” with “authoritarianism,” and many found it difficult to assert authority in the classroom. In contrast, experienced teachers tended to distinguish between two dimensions of authority: *the teacher as an authority*, requiring expertise in the curriculum, and *the teacher in authority*, requiring pedagogical competence. Several participants emphasised that *the teacher as an authority* refers specifically to mastery within one’s academic specialisation, signifying authority in the subject matter. Authority requires not only subject expertise but also the competence to manage the classroom effectively; without this, teachers risk losing control. Thus, teacher as authority stems from subject mastery and ongoing research, while teacher in authority derives from classroom management skills. Professional competence encompassing curriculum knowledge, subject expertise, and effective management, positively influences learner behaviour (Obadire and Sinthumule 2021). Authority stems from teachers’ curriculum expertise, subject-matter proficiency, and skilful classroom management. Brown (2004) notes that teachers’ authority depends on learners’ and parents’ belief that they are knowledgeable, pedagogically competent, and committed to learner success. Confidence and expertise in one’s specialisation foster trust, respect, and classroom influence. As Hargreaves, Elhawaryb, and Mahgoubc (2018) note, authority requires both pedagogic skill and classroom management; without competence, however, teachers’ risk being ridiculed within the school community. Effective pedagogy also requires classroom management, with teachers exercising authority to maintain order.

Rethinking Teachers’ Authority in a Democratic Classroom

During the apartheid era, authority in schools reflected what Hirst and Peters (1970, 123) describe as traditional authority, the teacher as a content specialist and benevolent despot. Rooted in the 1970s debate in England between “traditional” and “progressive” educators, this model was authoritarian, characterised by high control and low warmth. It enforced expected behaviours but offered little support for learners’ agency or individual needs (Walker 2009). By contrast, Hirst and Peters’s notion of the progressive teacher emphasised a more democratic classroom, combining high control

with high warmth, demanding appropriate behaviour while also showing care and concern for learners' individuality.

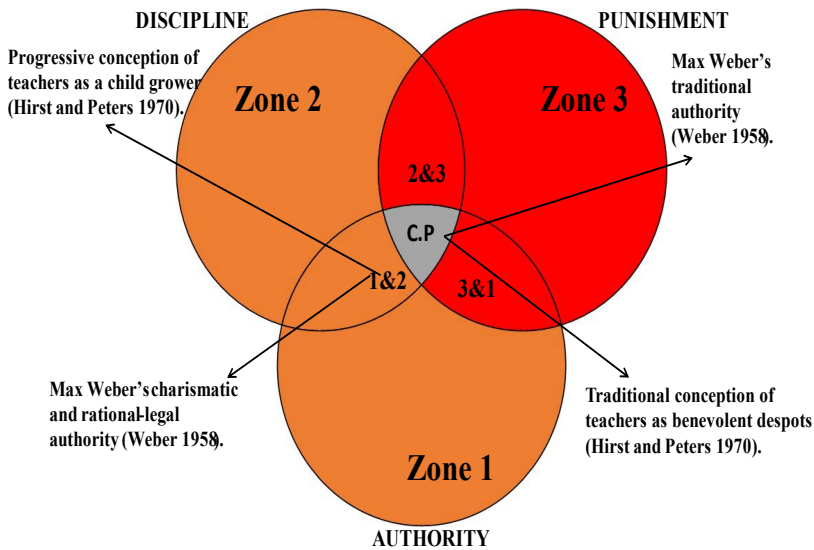


Figure 1: Conceptions of authority and discipline (Egunlusi 2020, 96). Note: C.P. = corporal punishment

As shown in Figure 1, Max Weber's types of authority intersect with Hirst and Peters's conceptions. The overlap of zones 1, 2, and 3 illustrates the authoritarian mode of discipline prevalent during apartheid, when corporal punishment was a central tool. Yet this approach did not foster constructive outcomes. Within this study, discipline is conceived as learners' demonstration of socially acceptable behaviour in educational and societal contexts without reliance on coercion (Egunlusi 2025). The punitive approach of apartheid-era schooling contradicts this conception, as research shows punishment causes pain, emotional harm, passivity, and even feelings of revenge (Department of Education 2000; Government of South Africa 2024). Authority in that period reflected traditional models, with teachers as content specialists and benevolent despots, marked by high control but low warmth, enforcing compliance without supporting learners' agency (Walker 2009). By contrast, the progressive teacher is more democratic, combining high control with high warmth: demanding appropriate behaviour while showing care and respect for learners' individuality. Importantly, zones 2 and 3 in Figure 1 distinguish discipline from punishment; a progressive teacher does not rely on corporal punishment. Thus, the study's conceptual framework must be

revisited and redesigned to rethink authority beyond punitive paradigms, as illustrated in Figure 2.

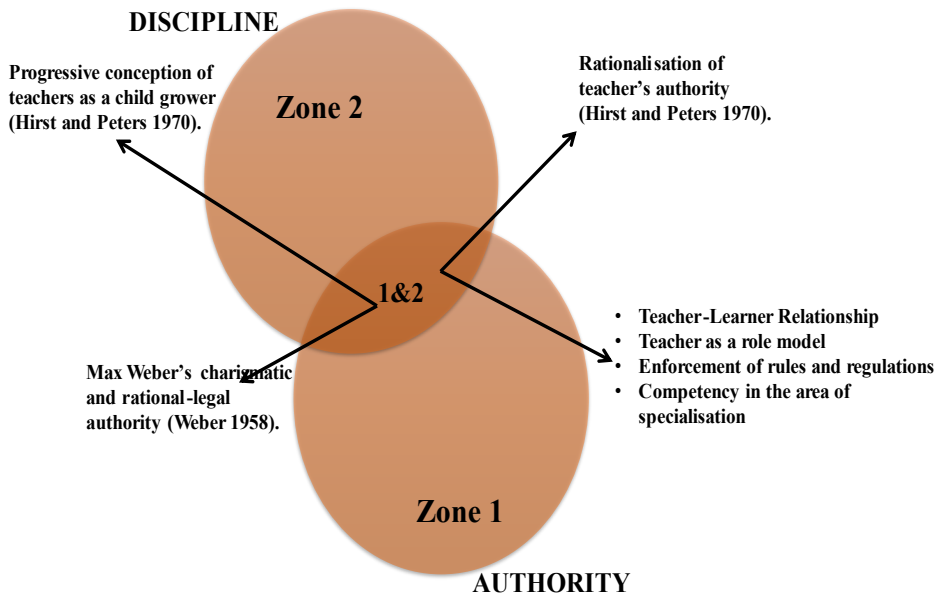


Figure 2: Rethinking authority outside the authoritarian mode of discipline

Figure 2 illustrates how the intersection of zones 1 and 2 demonstrates that teachers can exercise authority in managing discipline without resorting to punitive measures. Effective teaching and learning require teachers to maintain authority and control in the classroom, with the goal of enhancing academic performance. Hirst and Peters (1970) observe that teachers often shy away from exercising their authority because they confuse authority with authoritarianism. For teachers accustomed to authoritarian and punitive practices, abandoning corporal punishment proved especially challenging. Khewu (2012) notes that many teachers felt excluded from decisions on alternative disciplinary practices and view the challenge of school indiscipline as rooted in the weak implementation of these practices. Some teachers are struggling with discipline and regard these alternatives as inadequate, time-consuming, and ineffective in curbing misconduct (Maphosa and Shumba 2010; Nkuna 2022; Padayachee and Gcelu 2022; Pitsoe and Machaisa 2023; Segalo and Rambuda 2018; Wolhuter and van der Walt 2020). Teachers also believe that the Department of Education downplays the seriousness of the problem, despite its impact on teaching, learning, and school management (Khewu 2012; Moyo, Khewu, and Bayaga 2014). As a result, educators in South Africa report growing frustration and helplessness over discipline issues (Khewu 2012). Smit (2013) found that 58 per cent of teachers support reinstating corporal punishment, citing the failure of current alternatives. How can a teacher's authority be effective in a democratic classroom?

Teacher–Learner Relationship

The study highlights that teachers are expected to embody key qualities, including presence, confidence, communication competence, and relational skills, all of which should be exercised with care and compassion. Egeberg and McConney (2018) similarly highlight that caring teachers communicate and listen effectively. Thus, authority rests on confidence, communication, and compassion. Paul (2006) argues that managing misconduct requires teachers to build trust, foster self-discipline and dignity, and involve parents. Effective teaching stems from strong teacher-learner relationships, which encourage learners to accept authority. Oosthuizen, Wolhuter, and Du Toit (2003) note that without trust, authority becomes mere power. Understanding learners' anxieties helps teachers interpret behaviour and address underlying issues. Hargreaves, Elhawaryb, and Mahgoubc (2018) found that learners view authoritarianism as detrimental to both teacher authority and relationships, while Jinot (2018) reported that learners dislike authoritarian classrooms. Learners' backgrounds differ; teachers must adapt their approach and connect with each learner at their level. Building rapport demonstrates care, encourages learners to confide in teachers, and deepens understanding of their needs. Strong communication skills are central to this process, enabling teachers to engage learners effectively. Egeberg and McConney (2018) observed that positive behaviour was more prevalent in classrooms where teachers fostered caring and respectful relationships. Ultimately, exerting authority depends on how teachers relate and communicate with learners.

Teacher as a Role Model

Teachers' authority is reinforced by the display of good qualities, with seasoned educators noting that setting a positive example is vital for managing the classroom. Learners are more likely to respect and obey teachers they admire (Hirst and Peters 1970). The authority of teachers is strengthened when they embody qualities that make them role models for learners to emulate (Hargreaves, Elhawaryb, and Mahgoubc 2018). Presentation also matters—teachers should dress professionally, as poor or inappropriate attire can invite indiscipline (Nwobodo 2018). Ultimately, teachers' conduct must consistently reflect the values they teach.

Enforcement of Rules and Regulations

Effective classroom management requires the enforcement of rules and conditions that establish order and command. For learners to learn within a disciplined environment, it is essential that basic conditions of order and command be established and maintained through rationalised, authoritative action (Peters 1973). Importantly, learners should be involved in rulemaking (Moyo, Khewu, and Bayaga 2014), ensuring their voices are heard even while they remain under teacher authority. Inclusive decision-making enables learners to express their opinions, promoting collaboration and mutual respect. Without such freedom, learners may feel discouraged from approaching teachers when facing difficulties. Teachers must remain flexible so that learners feel comfortable confiding in them during difficult times. For schools to function smoothly, teacher

commands must be respected when tied to educational purposes, not personal gain. Rules that guide focus and obedience ultimately serve learners' best interests.

Competency in the Area of Specialisation

For teachers to exercise authority effectively, competence is essential. As highlighted by some teachers in the study, learners tend to challenge or disregard teachers who demonstrate a lack of knowledge in their field. Egeberg and McConney (2018) found that teachers lacking subject knowledge or confidence often struggle with classroom management, leading learners to withhold trust and respect. Confidence in subject mastery enables teachers to exercise authority, express their views, and engage constructively with learners (Kurland 1992). Effective teaching requires openness to new ideas and secure self-awareness of one's role. For novice teachers, discipline challenges can be overwhelming (Alemdag and Erdem 2017). How effectively can teachers manage classrooms through their authority, and are they aware of its legitimacy? Griffin (1983) and Guskey (1986) emphasise the need for mentoring and staff development; such programmes strengthen professional growth, improve teaching skills, and help novice teachers recognise and exercise their legitimate authority (Achinstein and Fogo 2014; Kemmis et al. 2014; Iancu-Haddad and Oplatka 2009; Rotonya 2017). Ultimately, authority rests on curriculum knowledge, pedagogical skill, and the ability to maintain order while imparting knowledge (Hargreaves, Elhawaryb, and Mahgoubc 2018). To sustain this, teachers must remain open to acquiring new knowledge.

Freire (2005) cautions that authority must avoid both immobilising freedom and being dismissed in its name. Freire further explains that authority acquires meaning only in relation to freedom; without it, authority degenerates into selfishness. As such, freedom gains depth through authority, which, when exercised authentically, nurtures and protects freedom. According to Peters (1972), progressive teachers prioritise the development of emotional maturity, moral autonomy, and learner independence. A permissive classroom climate nurtures these qualities, enabling learners to become self-disciplined and confident in making personal decisions. As Hirst and Peters (1970) note, the exercise of authority becomes detrimental when pursued for a teacher's self-interest, but beneficial when directed toward the welfare and advancement of learners. Teachers must rationalise their authority—establishing and enforcing rules for educational purposes while fostering constructive relationships with learners. Authority and classroom control remain essential foundations for successful teaching.

Recommendations

For effective classroom management, class sizes should remain relatively small, ideally no more than 25 to 30 learners. To achieve this, the Department of Education must provide adequate infrastructure and facilities, including well-equipped classrooms, to support the smooth functioning of schools. Proper infrastructure enables teachers to manage learners more effectively, ensuring that teaching and learning are more efficient

and effective. Monitoring learners is only feasible in classrooms that are not overcrowded. Smaller class sizes create a more conducive environment for both teachers and learners, enhancing engagement and overall educational outcomes. Beyond general staff development initiatives, mentorship training for novice teachers should be facilitated by both the Department of Education and school leadership. Future research should explore whether primary school teachers experience challenges in exercising authority or broaden the inquiry by comparing schools across township and urban contexts.

Conclusion

In creating a democratic classroom, progressive teachers must move beyond the traditional image of the benevolent despot to embrace the role of child growers. The rationalisation of authority is central: while teachers inevitably exercise control, its purpose determines whether it serves learners' interests or merely the teacher's self-interest. As illustrated in Figure 1, the relationship between Weber's types of authority and Hirst and Peters's conceptions highlights that discipline requires authority, yet the means of control must avoid coercion or inflicting pain. Instead, authority should be exercised through constructive training outside the punishment paradigm. Hirst and Peters contend that authority becomes harmful when used selfishly, but beneficial when directed toward learners' growth. Substantial exercise of teachers' authority not only supports discipline but also enhances academic performance, encouraging learners to reach their full potential and fostering a more peaceful and tolerant society.

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