Leading or losing? -Lost in the classroom

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Abstract
According to the results of this study, more than 3000 teachers in Norwegian schools experience a lack of control in their classroom. We investigated how teachers perceive their own authority, in particular in relation to classroom control. In a representative sample, about 70 % of teachers reported having good authority and control. However, we were especially interested in the number of teachers who reported having little or no authority and control. About 5 % of the teachers perceived themselves as having very little authority in their classrooms, and 6.7 % reported that they perceived themselves as having no or little control.

Introduction

International research is clear that discipline problems put a heavy load on teachers, and are a source of occupational stress (e.g. Cluenies-Ross, Little & Kienhuis, 2008; Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). Teachers new to the profession, in particular, report that problems controlling pupil behaviour are the most severe challenges in their job (Brekelmans, Wubbels & van Tartwijk, 2005). However, both inexperienced and experienced teachers are conserned about pupils' misbehaviour in classrooms, both nationally, and internationally (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Osher, Bear, Sprague & Doyle, 2010; Vaaland, Idsoe & Roland, 2011). Teachers who are failing to cope with classroom management and control are at risk of burn-out, and these challenges cause some individuals to leave the profession (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Levin & Nolan, 2006). In addition to the trouble disruptive and negative pupil behaviour causes for teachers, it also has undesirable consequences for pupils' learning. In classrooms with high levels of disruptive behaviour and weak leadership, the conditions for learning will be disadvantageous (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Gu, Lai & Ye, 2011; Infantino & Little, 2005; Marzano, 2003).

Comparative results from the PISA-studies have revealed a picture of Norwegian schools with poor academic outcome combined with high scores on classroom disruption (Kjærnsli & Lie, 2005; Kjærnsli, Lie, Olsen, Roe & Turmo, 2004; Kjærnsli, Lie, Olsen & Roe, 2007). Kjærnsli and colleagues (2007) draw attention to classroom management and a weakening of teachers' leadership role in an attempt to explain why Norwegian schools seem to struggle with poor discipline and poor academic outcomes. Sometimes a school class can develop into a group which is quite resistant to leadership, where troublesome pupil behaviour seems to become common among pupils. In such classes, deterioration of teacher authority is not only occasional but more like a permanent situation (Rogers, 1997; Vaaland, 2007).

Disruptive and disobedient pupil behaviour beyond the limits that the teacher is able to deal with effectively, is one type of situation that may lead to teachers' feeling lack of control. There are, of course, other reasons why this feeling can arise, e.g. serious lack of competence in teachers. Yet,

providing a list of risks and reasons is not the main theme of this study. It is obvious that classroom life is challenging for many of those who have their daily work there, and that some of these challenges threaten the efficiency of teaching, learning and personal development that is meant to happen there. We therefore want to look at the extent to which teachers experience holding a position in class that is compatible with leadership. The aim of this research note is to assess teachers' experiences of their influence as classroom leaders, with particular attention on those who report having little or no control in their classrooms.

Authority, influence and control

We define authority as a position that regulates the process of influence. Authority gives a person legitimacy to lead and is gained and sustained by trust (Hansen, 2006). When a leader possesses authority, her advice, demands, instructions and support become valid and important to those led by her. Classroom leaders like this are significant when they motivate, challenge and correct pupils. However, lack of authority leaves the teacher less effective in both positive and corrective communication with the pupils. At the final stage of loss of authority, the teacher's words have hardly any impact on the pupils. Authority implies influence, which is power (McClelland, 1970), but there is an important distinction between the kind of power practised by an authoritarian leader and the kind where power exercised by an authority is based on trust and confidence (Roland, 2007). In contrast to authoritarianism, authority is acknowledgement given by free will (Brynhildsen, 1987).

Authority is a general term that has to be applied to the specific context, in this case, the classroom. In classrooms, authority should be directed at realizing individual and group learning and development. Creating a sound learning environment as well as a positive social climate are natural parts of this approach. Authoritative classroom leadership has been well described and evaluated as an effective strategy in achieving these goals. The teacher-to-pupil relationship that develops in the context of authoritative leadership may provide the teacher with authority. According to literature, authoritative teaching and classroom leadership stands out as a powerful approach to pupils' academic and social learning, (Ertesvåg, 2011, for overview).

> *"Authoritative teachers work to build relationships of warmth, acceptance and openness; they establish high standards and have high expectations of socially responsible behaviour; they enforce rules and standards in a firm and consistent manner while using reprimands and punitive strategies when necessary; and they promote autonomy by encouraging the pupil's participation in decisions about his/her behaviour"* (Ertesvåg, 2011 p. 52).

Given this, teachers can build a base of authority in a class through authoritative leadership.

The power it takes to practise control (regulation) is one dimension in authority (Roland, 2007) and practising control is part of authoritative leadership (Ertesvåg, 2011). Arguments that control is a necessary part of classroom leadership follow logically from this. A classroom leader establishes standards and implements rules and procedures that help realize the school's objectives for each pupil and for the class as a whole. Further, the teacher supports pupils' behaviour by showing appreciation of positive behaviour and guiding pupils when needed. Control is closely linked to this work because the leader has to protect standards and guidelines by intervening when these are threatened or broken. A teacher who has little or no control will struggle to stop pupil behaviour that is against the rules of the class or the teachers' instructions (Roland, 2011).

All teachers have to be prepared to meet some degree of challenge in the form pupil misbehaviour (Marzano, 2003), and problems may span from pupils being off-task or mildly annoying to a total loss of control. Generally, when the classroom leader is challenged by pupils the teacher's authority and well-being is at stake. Even if all teachers are annoyed by disruptive pupil behaviour from time to time, some teachers face challenges far beyond this and find themselves with hardly any control in classes which they are expected to lead (Rogers, 1997). When a teacher has lost or failed to gain the legitimacy to lead, she will not be able to exercise control, and with no control, her authority will deteriorate and eventually disappear. This situation is serious, both for the class and the teacher. When a leadership vacuum occurs, the teacher is often replaced by pupils who have the status to rule their peers or take informal leadership (Vaaland, Idsoe & Roland, 2011: Vaaland & Roland, 2013).

Disruptive pupil behaviour is one example of a factor that might lead to teachers' experiencing lack of control and other factors may also be present. However, our principal concern is that authority, including a mandate to practise control, is an important platform for good leadership.

Research question

This study aims to explore how teachers perceive their experiences of authority in class. Our analysis reflects all levels of authority, but our main interest is to answer the following questions: 1) To what extent do teachers perceive that they have little or no authority in class? 2) To what extent do teachers perceive that they have little or no control in class? 3) Is perceived lack of control associated with a teacher's gender, work experience, role, e.g., form teacher or subject teacher and whether he/she teaches in primary or lower secondary school.

Method

Sample and procedures

As part of a comprehensive investigation of School Environment, a survey was conducted among 876 teachers in primary or lower secondary schools in Norway. The response rate was 55%. The sample was representative according to the Norwegian Central Bureau of Statistics' standards for classifying municipalities (Statistics Norway, 1994). The schools within each municipality were randomly selected. For more information about the sample see Havik (2005).

Measure

Teacher authority was measured using four item scale. Items were formulated as statements about how the teacher experiences his/her position in the class. Items estimate different aspects of authority as perceived by teacher. These are closely related to authoritative leadership as they reflect likely outcomes of authoritative leadership in class. They measured respect from the class, development of a social climate, learning environment in addition to perceived control which is a specific focus in this study. There was a 6-point scale, varying from 0 (*totally disagree*) to 5 *(totally agree)*. Form teachers were supposed to report the situation in their assigned class. Subject teachers were to report for the class which they had for most lessons during a week. Cronbachs' alpha was .83.

Experience was measured by the number of years in teaching and the teachers were divided into four groups according to their experience: Fewer than 5 years, 5 to 10 years, 11 to 20 years, and more than 20 years. This career demarcation in periods based on experience must be seen as arbitrary and not connected to specific career stages.

Descriptive statistics, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and chi-square tests were provided using SPSS.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The means, standard deviations, skewness and kurtosis of the distribution of teachers' self-reports are presented in Table 1. The table contains information for four items and the scale. The results indicate that teachers, in general, feel that they have respect and control in class. The highest average score (3.96) is for the item, "I feel that I have control in class", the lowest average score (3.46) is the item, "I feel that I succeed in developing a good social climate in the class". Although teachers score relatively highly on all of the items, the high standard deviations indicate that scores vary between teachers. Skewness and kurtosis are included for information, but not commented on further.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics. Numbers (n), Mean, standard deviations (SD), skewness (Ske) and kurtosis (Kurt) for items and scale.

	n	Mean	SD	Ske	Kurt
The class/group respects me as the leader of the class/group	820	3.80	1.45	-1.31	.72
I feel that I succeed in developing a good social climate in the class	817	3.46	1.18	-.86	.46
The students have a supportive learning environment in my classes.	818	3.57	1.07	-.98	1.17
I feel that I have control in the class	820	3.96	1.19	-1.54	2.20
Scale: Teacher authority	822	3.70	1.00	-1.14	1.29

Scores 0-5. High score is positive.

Descriptive data for gender and experience are presented in Table 2. The sample comprised 230 male and 610 female teachers. The results revealed that 43.7 percent of the teachers had more than 20 years of experience, where as 23.1 % had less than 5 years.

Table 2. Descriptive data for gender and work experience

	N	Percentage
Gender		
Women	610	69.6
Men	230	26.3
Missing	36	4.1
Eexperience		
Less than 5 years	202	23.1
5-10 years	110	12.5
11- 20 years	144	16.4
More than 20 years	383	43.7
Missing	37	4.2

Teacher authority

Results presented in Table 3 indicate that most teachers have a sense of authority in their classroom. Almost 70 % of the teachers report having high level of authority (scores 4-5). However, about 30 % of the teachers report some lack of authority (scores 0-3), and five percent of the teachers score 0 or 1 for the scale indicating that they do not feel they have authority in their classroom.

Results for each item indicate that 74.2 % of the teachers feel they are respected as the leader by their class (scores 4 and 5). However, 11.4 % of teachers report that the class does not respect the teacher as a leader of the classroom. Similarly, most teachers feel their leadership contributes to a good social climate, and that they succeed in developing a supportive learning environment in their class. On the other hand, 7.6 % of the teachers report that they do not succeed in establishing a good social climate in the class. In addition, 5.3 % report that their students do not have a good learning environment in their lessons. Although 77.6% score 4 or 5 when specifically asked whether they have control in the class, 6.7 % of the teachers felt they did not (scores 0 and 1).

Table 3: Frequencies and percentages of scores for single items and teacher authority scale

	Totally disagree										Totally agree	
	0		1		2		3		4		5	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
The class/group respects me as the leader	44	5.4	48	5.9	56	6.8	64	7.8	272	33.2	336	41.0
Succeed in developing a good social climate in the class	19	2.3	43	5.3	89	10.9	196	24.0	331	40.5	139	17.0
Supportive learning environment in my classes	13	1.6	30	3.7	64	7.8	214	26.2	363	44.4	134	16.4
I have control in the class	21	2.6	34	4.1	30	3.7	99	12.1	326	39.8	310	37.8
Scale: Teacher authority	14	1.7	27	3.3.	41	5.0	167	20.3	251	30.5	322	39.2

Variations in perceived control related to individual correlates and school phase

Results presented in Table 4 indicate that men scored significantly lower for perceived control than women. However, considering that most men work in lower secondary schools where teachers in general score lower on control, we tested for the effect of school type. Results indicated that when controlling for school type there are no gender differences in lack of control.

Furthermore, results presented in Table 4 indicate significant differences in control between groups of teachers dependent on work experience. Mean scores indicate that the least experienced teachers have less control than more experienced teachers. Post hoc analysis reveals that teachers with less than 5 years of teaching report significant lower than all groups of more experienced teachers. Control increases with experience, except that the most experiences teachers report less control than groups of teachers with 5-20 years of teaching. However, the most difference between the group of teachers with more than 20 years of experience were not significantly lower than the teachers with any of the groups representing 5-20 years of experience.

Table 4: Perceived control. Number (n), Mean, Standard deviation (SD) and results of one-way analysis of variance for gender, work experience, type of teacher and school type.

		n	Mean	SD	F	p
Gender	Women	573	3.75	1.01	4.49	.034
	Men	221	3.58	1.22		
Work Experience	Less than 5 years	196	3.52	1.11	3.78	.010
	5-10 years	102	3.80	.89		
	11-20 years	141	3.85	.95		
	More than 20 years	355	3.72	.96		
Teacher	Form teacher	491	3.71	.95	.014	.906
	Subject teacher	315	3.70	1.06		
School type	Primary	536	3.78	1.01	9.631	.002
	Lower Secondary	271	3.54	.97		

Results indicated no differences in control between form teachers and subject teachers. However, a significant difference between primary and secondary teachers was found, indicating less perceived control among secondary school teachers compared to primary teachers.

Discussion

Main findings

The main findings in this explorative study indicate that most teachers experience authority as classroom leaders. However, one in twenty teachers reports their authority being challenged to an extent far beyond what should be accepted. Some 6.7 % of the teachers - that is one in every 15 teachers – report a perceived lack of control in class.

Pupils' misbehaviour in classrooms is of great concern to teachers both nationally, and internationally (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006; Osher, Bear, Sprague & Doyle, 2010; Vaaland, Idsoe & Roland, 2011). It was interesting, therefore, to investigate the number of teachers who self-reported the most severe lack of control. Although most teachers reported having authority as leaders in their classroom, both on scale level and on the specific item about control, it is disturbing that 5 % of the teachers do not feel they have authority. Given that there are 66082[1] primary and secondary teachers in Norway, the results suggest that more than 3300 teachers do not have control in their classroom.

Even if the response rate demands that we be careful in interpretation and generalization of results, the relatively high number of informants makes it important to consider the findings carefully and take them seriously. At the end of this chapter we will comment on some methodological considerations regarding the study, but first we will discuss parts of the results in more detail.

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[1] www.skoleporten.no

Lack of authority related to some variables

    Seniority. The least experienced teachers report less control than their more experienced colleagues. This is in line with findings from Breckelman, Wubbels and van Tartwijks (2005) which indicate that it takes about 5 years before new teachers find their classroom management style. As part of a classroom management scale, Melnick and Meisters' (2006) asked teachers to respond to the statement, "Student behavior is not a problem for me". On a five point scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree) 19 % of newly qualified teachers stated *strongly disagree* or *disagree*. Only 7 % of experienced teachers reported the same. de La Toree Cruz and Arias (2007) found that new teachers perceived maintaining discipline to be the most difficult activity. Although maintaining discipline and feeling of control are somewhat different, they are related. However, one should interpret both the results of our and other studies carefully because 'control' and similar concepts, such as 'maintaining discipline', are ambiguous concepts which makes it more difficult to interpret the results. Some very experienced teachers tend to become stricter when they get older. Because of the distance, both emotionally and in age, older teachers may be less connected with the life style of pupils. Therefore, these teachers may become more and more dissatisfied with pupils' behaviour (Breckelman et al. 2005). On the other hand, a situation which a new teacher may experience as 'disorder' may be considered as 'order' by a more experienced teacher. However, even if a more experienced teacher would master the same situation well, this will not reduce the newly qualified   teacher's *feeling* of lack of control and authority. It may, in fact, increase the newly qualified teacher's perception of inadequacy.

    A study by Thomas and Beauchamp (2011) shows how teachers' perceptions of themselves shift from optimism to frustration when they finish training and start work in their profession. The professional identity of new teachers, prior to their first year of teaching, is described as highly focused on being supportive to the pupils, being their guide and their rock. After some months, their professional identity shifts towards a focus on themselves as teachers in a position characterized by a struggle to survive. Thomas and Beauchamp concluded that after some months of teaching, teachers had a lack of confidence and a sense of powerlessness in their professional lives. The message is very much in agreement with earlier studies and our own results; too many newly qualified teachers seem to lack the skills necessary to succeed in classroom leadership and especially in controlling disruptive behaviour. There is an urgent need for action to change this situation.

    School phase. In our study secondary school teachers reported, on average, less control than primary school teachers. One reason might be that the focus on strengthening teacher-pupil relationships has traditionally been less focused in secondary schools compared to primary schools. Another explanation may be the general developmental tendency in teenagers to be less affiliated to adult authority. However, secondary school teachers should be provided with competence and support in order to succeed as classroom leaders because this reduces stress among teachers and is a way to increase pupils' learning. Previous research indicates that interventions in primary schools are more effective than interventions in secondary schools (Smith, Pepler & Rigby, 2004). However, a Norwegian intervention, aimed specifically at preventing and reducing problem behaviour and improving the learning environment, has shown considerable improvement in lower secondary schools (Ertesvåg, 2009). Strengthening teacher authority is a main strategy in the intervention.

The Norwegian government is currently launching a new initiative to strengthen lower secondary schools. Classroom management and teacher authority are heavily focused (Meld. St. 22 2010-2011). Given the specific demands and challenges experienced in lower secondary schools, more research is needed into how knowledge about developing teacher authority and control can be implanted in lower secondary schools. Generally, for both primary and lower secondary schools, we have the knowledge needed for successful implementation (e.g. Ertesvåg, 2009, Ertesvåg & Vaaland, 2007). However, what still remain is to enable schools and teachers to implement this knowledge into practice to an extent that all teachers gain authority in their class.

Classroom leadership

Classroom leadership is a major activity for all teachers. When well performed it brings important advantages, and when not well performed, it increases the risk for unhealthy developments in a class. High quality classroom leadership pays off in terms of good learning conditions, a positive social climate, good pupil behaviour and not least, better working conditions for the teacher and pupils (Brophy, 2006; Kounin, 1970; Marzano, 2003; Roland & Galloway, 2002). Teachers' potential influence on all these aspects is huge (Marzano, 2003). In order to optimize pupils' learning, teachers must be skilled in classroom leadership, including having the competence to establish their own legitimacy to lead (Hansen, 2006). These factors seem to work together, as high quality classroom leadership pays off in terms of legitimacy to lead; i.e., authority. A leader who has gained authority is also in a good position to carry out high quality leadership.

In recent years, an authoritative approach to classroom leadership has been discussed, evaluated and recommended as an effective way to achieve academic and social learning (Ertesvåg, 2011; Nordahl et al., 2006; Roland, 2007). Authoritative teaching builds on a model developed by Baumrind (1991) in the context of parenting. In classrooms, the principles of authoritative leadership are described as teachers' combining caring for the pupils with control (see e.g. Roland 2007). This style is also a good way to avoid authoritarianism.

Teachers who possess authority become significant to the pupils. This implies that the teacher's academic and social support is valued, and that the standards and demands set by the teacher are considered valid. In other words, authority gives the teacher access to influence and control (Roland, 2007). High quality classroom leaders establish and implement standards, carefully teach the pupils how to behave in accordance with those standards, and consistently take action when standards are threatened or broken (Emmer, Evertson & Worseham, 2003; Roland, 2007; 2011). Support and control are supplementary in this preferred classroom leadership style.

Poor classroom leadership is associated with pupil misbehaviour and diminished academic outcomes. When a class is generally disruptive and off-task, classroom leadership becomes harder and the risk of authority being destroyed increases. The results from our study show that one out of twenty teachers goes to their class and tries to teach in a context where their authority is more or less constantly challenged or even insulted. This situation is serious for the teachers and pupils involved. Five times as many teachers report some lack of authority (answer 2 and 3 on the scale). The situation reflected by these scores on the scale is less serious, but these teachers could have better working conditions, and more successful authoritative leadership would probably benefit learning outcomes among their pupils. We consider that the rest, about 70 % of the teachers, report conditions which are acceptable in terms of perceived authority.

School contextual factors

Yet, factors outside the classroom also influence how pupils, parents and society in general consider the role of teachers and the attitudes that develop towards teachers. One such factor is the school itself. The school context provides the premises in which each teacher works and affects their ability to gain sound influence over classes and pupils. Characteristics like school leadership, school climate, collegial cooperation, consistency about norms, policies etc. may work for or against a teacher's authority (Ertesvåg, 2012; Waller, 1932). In other words, the school-context may encourage or discourage respect for teachers in general and thereby affect how hard each teacher has to work to gain authority and be a good classroom leader. It follows from this that consistency among teachers and between teachers and the school leadership is important. This again implies that initiatives to strengthen each teacher in her class could be run at the school level.

Proactive aggressiveness as a particular challenge to the teacher's leadership, authority and control

Above we have mainly discussed how a teacher's classroom leadership can have a huge impact on pupils' behaviour and learning. Nevertheless, we find it appropriate to focus on a supplementary view for a moment, namely on pupil aggressiveness. This is relevant because of the important dynamics between pupil aggressiveness, pupil behaviour, teacher leadership and teacher authority (Roland, 2007; Vaaland & Roland, 2012). This implies that even if the teacher has a powerful influence on pupils, the teacher is also significantly influenced by the pupils in the class. High levels of aggressiveness in pupils are associated with disruptive behaviour which implies a threat to teacher authority. Proactive aggressiveness is particularly important in this (Roland & Idsoe, 2001; Vaaland, Idsoe & Roland, 2011). In a recent study, Vaaland and Roland (2013) found that proactively aggressive pupils have a perceptual orientation towards signs of weakness in teachers they meet for the first time. This means that a teacher meeting a new class is on a stage and some pupils are predisposed to look for opportunities to dethrone the teacher. Such an orientation towards weakness or vulnerabilities may indicate an interest in gaining social power and influence at the cost of the teacher and thereby decreasing the teacher's ability to establish leadership. The social influence and status often held by proactively aggressive pupils makes it even more important for teachers to learn about these connections as well as to train systematically to gain the skills required to prevent such aggression e.g. by minimizing signs of vulnerabilities when meeting new classes. First meetings are important for establishing leadership, and establishing leadership early on may make the teacher more capable of practicing control (Vaaland, 2011).

Methodological considerations and further research

The aim of this study was to investigate how teachers perceive their authority as classroom leaders and to what extent teachers report loss of control in their classrooms. We also wanted to see whether some groups of teachers struggle more than others. Such questions are answered by frequencies/prevalence that are sensitive to bias if samples are biased. Even if the sample of schools is representative, the response rate in the teacher survey demands careful interpretation. However, the relatively high number of informants make it important to consider the findings seriously. We recommend that results are considered exploratory and preliminary until replications are made.

The scale used to measure authority was developed for this study and was based on theory of authoritative teaching. No specific problems regarding validity or reliability were detected. One

item explicitly measures teacher's experience of control. This phenomenon is presented as one dimension in the more complex concept of authority. Nevertheless, control could also be considered as a concept that itself includes several dimensions and therefore requires a more refined construct and measurement. The results about teachers lacking control make a strong case for further development of scales and research on how teachers experience and cope with the leadership role in their classrooms.

The experience of having general influence, and more specifically control, reflects subjective assessments. Teachers would probably describe identical classroom situations in different terms regarding teacher authority. This will not be further discussed here, but it is stressed that the question studied here is each individual teacher's *subjective* opinion about his or her own position in the class. Objective measures of authority or control would not express whether or to what degree teachers are stressed or burdened by classroom conditions. Measures of authority and control related to objective standards could add valuable knowledge, e.g. on how teachers' subjectively perceived positions are related to an independent measure. It also follows from the focus on subjectivity in this study that we cannot take for granted that those who report maximum control are the best teachers.

A normative discussion about control would probably reveal different standpoints among teachers as well as among other leaders (Krejsler & Moos, 2008). In other words, there will be different ideas about what a leader should keep under control, how strong the control should be, what sanctions should be applied, etc. These are important and wide-ranging discussions. However, our study builds on commonly accepted elements in authoritative classroom leadership; establishing rules, routines/procedures, guiding and regulating pupil behaviour, establishing relationships, organizing the classroom and the work (Emmer, Evertson & Worseham, 2003; Ertesvåg, 2011; Marzano, 2003; Roland, 1999). No matter how we emphasize the authoritative approach to teaching, some informants may have responded to questions about control from other points of view.

The seriousness of the results presented in this paper call for further investigation into perceived teacher authority, together with a broader approach that includes other measures of teachers' authority and leadership. We also emphasize that research, teacher training and in service training for teachers must provide individual teachers and schools with knowledge about and competence in solving problems with control. This will benefit teachers, pupils and society.

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