



# Critical perspectives on power dynamics in education. The case of Félix Henao Botero educational institution

## Perspectivas críticas sobre el ejercicio del poder en la educación. El caso de la institución educativa Félix Henao Botero

Giovanny Stiven Ramírez Mejía<sup>1</sup>  

### ABSTRACT

At the Félix Henao Botero Educational Institution, a detailed analysis of power relations was carried out, highlighting their influence on daily educational life and the school culture in general. The complexity of power relations was identified, extending beyond formal structures of authority and affecting the participation and well-being of community members. Empirical observations were linked to theories of power such as symbolic, disciplinary, and emancipatory power, providing analytical tools to understand power dynamics within the institution. It was evidenced how power relations shape access to resources, participation, and educational quality, leading to exclusion and inequality, emphasizing the need to question and transform these dynamics. Proposals were put forward to promote a more inclusive and equitable school culture, emphasizing the importance of active participation, education for empowerment, dialogue, respect, and the implementation of emancipatory pedagogical practices. The conclusions highlighted the urgency of redefining power relations in education, emphasizing that the proposed actions offer a path towards a more democratic, respectful, and inclusive school environment.

**Keywords:** education, educational prospecting, teacher influence, teacher role, training.

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<sup>1</sup>Universidad Metropolitana de Educación, Ciencia y Tecnología. Ciudad de Panamá, Panamá.

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### RESUMEN

En la Institución Educativa Félix Henao Botero se llevó a cabo un análisis detallado de las relaciones de poder, donde se destacó su influencia en la vida educativa diaria y en la cultura escolar en general. Se identificó la complejidad de las relaciones de poder, que van más allá de las estructuras formales de autoridad y afectan la participación y el bienestar de los miembros de la comunidad educativa. Las observaciones empíricas se relacionaron con teorías del poder, como el poder simbólico, disciplinario y emancipador en tanto herramientas analíticas para comprender las dinámicas de poder en la institución. Se evidenció cómo las relaciones de poder moldean el acceso a recursos, la participación y la calidad educativa; a la par que generan exclusión y desigualdad, lo que resalta la necesidad de cuestionar y transformar estas dinámicas. Se presentaron propuestas para promover una cultura escolar más inclusiva y equitativa, se destaca la importancia de la participación activa, la formación en educación para el poder, el diálogo y el respeto, así como la implementación de prácticas pedagógicas emancipadoras. Las conclusiones resaltaron la urgencia de redefinir las relaciones de poder en la educación; se enfatiza en que las propuestas de acción ofrecen un camino hacia un ambiente escolar más democrático, respetuoso e inclusivo.

**Palabras clave:** educación, formación, influencia del profesor, papel del docente, prospección educacional.

**Clasificación JEL:** I21, I23, I25

## INTRODUCTION

The exercise of power in education constitutes a multifaceted phenomenon that shapes the interactions, decisions, and dynamics within school institutions. This exercise largely defines students' and educators' teaching and learning experiences (Hallinger, 2020; Lumby, 2019; Sant, 2019). In this context of constant interaction and power negotiation, the institution studied stands as fertile ground for critically exploring the complexities surrounding the exercise of power in education.



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From the formal authority of the teaching staff to the implicit influences in everyday interactions between members of the educational context, power manifests itself in diverse ways in the school environment. At the same time, it influences the distribution of resources, decision-making, the creation of norms, and the configuration of individual and collective identities. In this sense, it is imperative to analyze the power dynamics present at the Félix Henao Botero Educational Institution in light of contemporary theoretical perspectives that address the relationship between power and education (Narayanan, 2021; Narayanan, 2022; Wong et al., 2020).

Examining power relations in education from different theoretical perspectives—notably symbolic power, disciplinary power, and emancipatory power—opens up the possibility of unraveling the complexities underlying the distribution and exercise of power. Each of these theoretical perspectives offers a unique lens through which to understand power dynamics in education, which will foster a more complete and nuanced view of how power relations intertwine and manifest in the school context (Agarwal & Sengupta-Irving, 2019; Duckworth & Tett, 2019; O'Connor et al., 2019).

By approaching power from these complementary perspectives, a more concise understanding of the roles and factors influencing the exercise of power in education is facilitated, opening the door to more inclusive, equitable, and transformative strategies that can empower all actors involved in the educational process (Alhadad et al., 2021; Domínguez et al., 2021). For this reason, this reflection article proposes an analysis of critical perspectives on the exercise of power in education. Furthermore, it aims to apply these theoretical lenses to the specific context studied.

## METHODOLOGY

Within the framework of this research, a rigorous methodology was designed to explore the complex power interactions that shape the current educational environment. This research aims to analyze how power relations are manifested and exercised in educational institutions, as well as to understand their impact on the educational experiences of students and educators.

To achieve this objective, a methodological approach was structured that combines a comprehensive literature review, critical analysis of relevant theoretical perspectives, empirical research, and ongoing critical reflection at each stage of the research process. The primary objective of this comprehensive methodological approach is to provide a deep and holistic understanding of the power dynamics in contemporary education. In doing so, it contributes to academic debate and the development of more inclusive and equitable educational practices (Cerigo & Quesnel-Vallée, 2020; Stern et al., 2020).

### Detailed analysis of theoretical perspectives

After collecting the relevant literature, the various theoretical perspectives related to power in the educational field were identified and analyzed. Theories such as symbolic power, disciplinary power, and emancipatory power, among others, were explored with the aim of understanding how power manifests itself in educational dynamics. This comparative and contrasting analysis of the different theoretical perspectives allowed for a more detailed understanding of the complexity of power relations in the educational context.

### Empirical research in the educational institution

In this section, empirical research will be conducted at the educational institution under study to directly analyze the power dynamics present in this specific educational environment. Observations, interviews, and analysis of institutional documents will be conducted to gain a detailed understanding of how power is exercised within this educational institution.

### Construction of a well-founded critical reflection

Based on the identified theoretical perspectives, an analytical matrix was developed to organize the key ideas extracted from the reviewed literature (Table 1). This matrix facilitated the integration of the various theoretical perspectives and served as a starting point for developing a grounded critical reflection. The implications of the exercise of power in education were explored, and potential avenues for transformation were proposed; this enriched the academic and practical dialogue in this area of study.

This matrix presents three main theoretical perspectives on power in education: symbolic power, disciplinary power, and emancipatory power. For each perspective, its main focus, associated key concepts, and specific

implications for the educational context are detailed. This structure allows for comparative visualization of the different theoretical perspectives and facilitates critical analysis focused on how each of them addresses the issue of power in education (Hulland, 2020; McGowan et al., 2020).

**Table 1.**

*Analysis matrix on theoretical perspectives on the exercise of power in the educational field*

Theoretical perspective	Principal approach	Key concepts	Implications for education
Symbolic Power	It explores how power manifests itself through symbols, meanings, and discourses.	Significance, representation, legitimization.	Influence on the construction of identities, curricula and pedagogical practices.
Disciplinary Power	It focuses on how power is exercised through mechanisms of control and surveillance.	Surveillance, normalization, discipline.	Impact on the regulation of behavior, conformity, and the reproduction of power structures.
Emancipatory Power	It proposes a vision of power oriented toward liberation, autonomy, and social transformation.	Participation, liberation, empowerment.	Promotion of democratic, critical, and emancipatory educational practices.

Source: own elaboration

### Ethical considerations and academic rigor

Throughout the research and analysis process, strict ethical considerations were maintained. The diversity of opinions present in the reviewed literature was respected, and the correct attribution of ideas and concepts was ensured, following ethical and academic standards regarding the use of sources and references. This commitment to academic integrity and transparency reinforced the credibility of the critical reflection developed in the article (Taquette & Souza, 2022).

## RESULTS Y DISCUSSION

### Reflections on power dynamics in the educational institution

This section presents in-depth reflections on the power dynamics identified in the institution studied. Additionally, it discusses how these dynamics influence daily interactions, the decision-making process, and the institutional culture. The aim is to foster critical reflection on the distribution and exercise of power in the educational context.

During the development of the research, it has been observed that power is not only manifested through formal authority structures, such as administration and teaching staff, but also subtly filters into everyday interactions between students, in the relationships between educational actors, and in their key decision-making processes that affect the school community as a whole (Looman et al., 2021; Philip & Gupta, 2020). Examining these power dynamics revealed latent tensions between formal authority and subaltern voices within the institution. The unequal distribution of power has created challenges for the effective participation of all stakeholders in school life, as well as for the creation of an inclusive and respectful environment that fosters dialogue and collaboration.

These manifestations have led to questions about how power hierarchies impact the autonomy, motivation, and emotional well-being of members of the educational community. Likewise, analyses are emerging about how these power distributions influence the quality of educational processes and the construction of a school culture based on equity and justice (Korpershoek et al., 2019; Vasconcellos et al., 2020). Meanwhile, it is observed that power relations are not static but rather are dynamically and multifacetedly intertwined among the different stakeholders that make up the school community. Thus, it is clear that power is exercised through formal authority structures, such as management and teaching staff, but it is also manifested in everyday interactions between students, in pedagogical practices, and in the unwritten rules that govern school life (Farmer et al., 2019; O'Brien & Dadswell, 2020).

On the other hand, these power relations can generate tensions, conflicts, and inequalities that directly impact the participation, inclusion, and well-being of participants in the educational context. Because of this, the importance of fostering scenarios for reflection and action that promote a more just and democratic redistribution of power is highlighted, an aspect that will foster a more inclusive, collaborative, and enriching school climate for all members of the educational context (Symonds, 2020; Symonds, 2021). This analysis has also allowed us to recognize the importance of questioning and problematizing existing power relations within the institution. Likewise, it is important to foster critical and constructive dialogue to promote transformations that favor equity, participation, and mutual respect within the educational environment.

### **Dialogue between findings and theoretical perspectives**

During the analysis of the findings at the educational institution, an enriching dialogue was established between empirical observations and the theoretical perspectives previously explored within the framework of the research. It was identified that the power dynamics observed at the institution resonate significantly with theories of power discussed in the academic literature. Furthermore, it was found that concepts such as symbolic power, disciplinary power, and emancipatory power offer valuable analytical lenses for understanding the complex power interactions that characterize school life at the Félix Henao Botero Educational Institution. For example, it was observed how symbols and institutional representations can be used to legitimize power hierarchies, how disciplinary norms and rules can reinforce relations of domination and control, and how emancipatory practices can challenge and subvert oppressive power structures.

This dialogue between the findings and theoretical perspectives has allowed for a deeper understanding of the institution's specific power dynamics, as well as the identification of possible points of intervention and transformation. It has been possible to appreciate how theories of power illuminate the reality observed in the institution, as well as offer conceptual tools to critically analyze existing power relations and imagine new forms of organization and coexistence based on principles of justice, equality, and mutual respect (Ladkin & Probert, 2019; Pratto & Stewart, 2019).

After this detailed analysis of the power dynamics in the institution, it is necessary to reflect on the significant impact these relations have on the educational process and the learning experience of students, teachers, and other school staff. To this end, emphasis will be placed on the need for transformation and change to promote a more democratic, inclusive, and participatory educational environment. It is evident that power relations shape not only interactions within the educational environment but also the distribution of resources, opportunities for participation, and the development of the highest possible quality of education for all students. It has been observed that an unequal exercise of power can lead to exclusion, marginalization, and inequality, which negatively influences the comprehensive development of individuals and the construction of an inclusive and equitable school community (Humphreys & Rigg, 2020; Kyza & Agesilaou, 2022; Tormey, 2021).

These reflections highlight the importance of making visible and problematizing the power relations present in education, as well as promoting pedagogical and organizational practices that foster democracy, active participation, and respect for diversity. It is necessary to rethink authority structures, decision-making mechanisms, and interaction dynamics within educational institutions in order to build a truly enriching, collaborative, and transformative learning environment for all involved.

### **Proposals for reflection and transformative action**

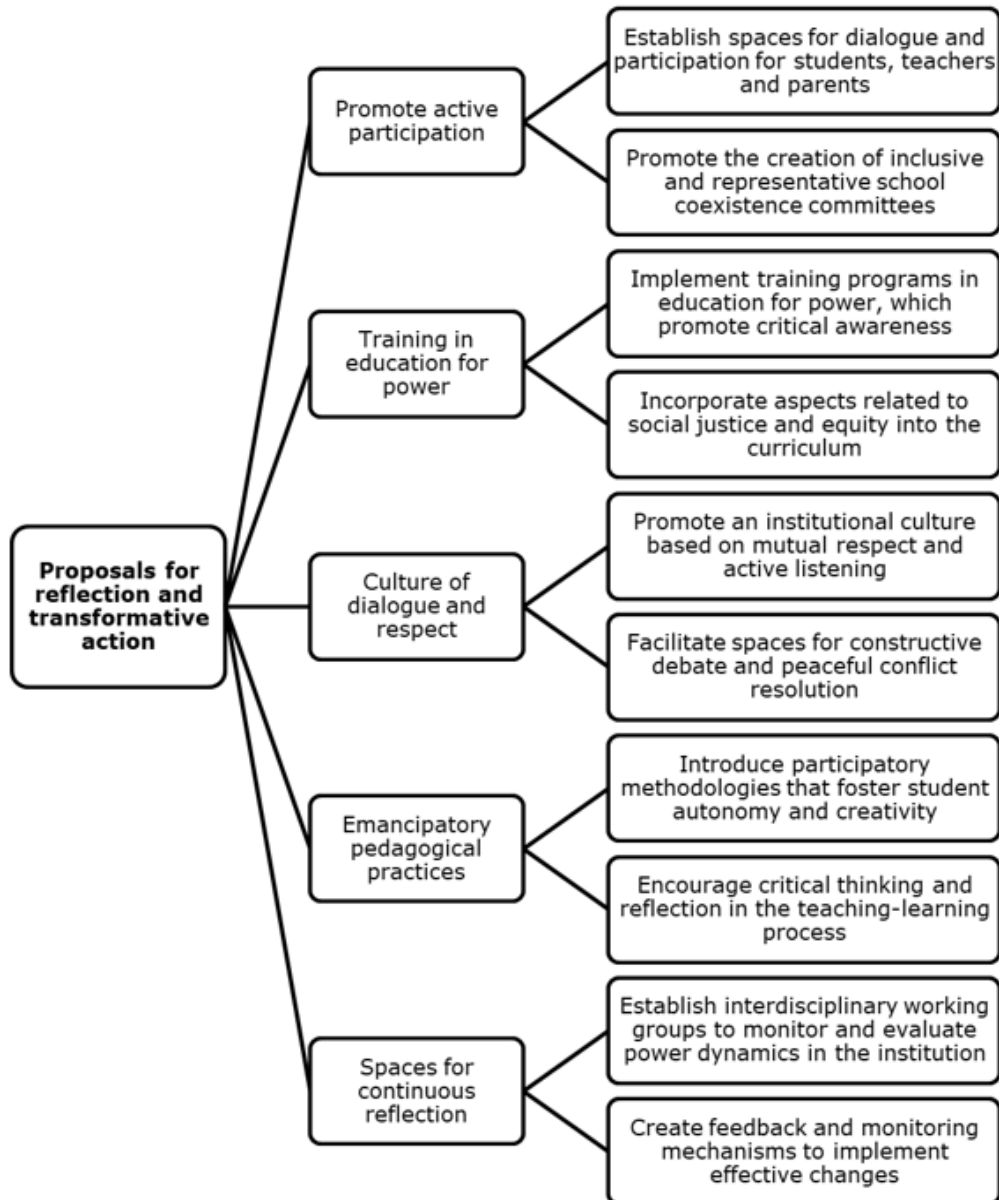
A detailed analysis of power dynamics has revealed an intricate web of relationships, norms, and structures that influence the daily lives of students, teachers, and administrative staff. These complex dynamics are limited to formal hierarchies of authority, such as those between administration and faculty, while also intertwining daily interactions, institutional decisions, and the configuration of the school culture as a whole. These power relations have been observed to permeate every aspect of school life, from the distribution of resources to participation in educational activities, thus shaping the experiences and opportunities of all educational community members. Thus, implicit and explicit norms, leadership decisions, and interpersonal dynamics contribute to the construction of an environment that can be both facilitating and limiting for the personal and academic development of those who interact within it.

A deeper look into these dynamics reveals how power relations can both enable and restrict access to educational opportunities, the exercise of autonomy, and equity in treatment and participation. Understanding the complexity of these interactions is essential to addressing the inequalities and challenges that arise, and to chart a path toward a

more equitable, inclusive, and dynamic school culture, where each individual feels valued, heard, and empowered to contribute positively to the educational environment in which they operate.

From this perspective, it has been observed that power is neither static nor homogeneous but manifests itself in diverse and sometimes subtle ways, affecting the participation and inclusion of members of the educational context. This reflection on power relations within the institution constitutes a fundamental starting point for identifying existing challenges and proposing concrete actions that promote a positive transformation toward a more democratic, equitable, and enriching school environment for all its members (Carvalho & Videira, 2019; Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020; Loo et al., 2019).

**Figure 1.**  
*Proposals for reflection and transformative action*



Source: own elaboration

Based on the postulates developed from the analysis of power dynamics in the educational context, a set of proposals are put forward aimed at promoting a significant transformation in power relations and school culture (Figure 1). These proposals seek not only to make visible and challenge existing power structures but also to foster active participation, equity, and respect in the educational environment. They seek to positively impact the educational context studied and lay the foundations for a profound transformation that promotes equity, participation, and empowerment of all participants in the educational process. Therefore, it is crucial to actively encourage, facilitate,

and promote the participation of all educational community members, from students to teachers and administrative staff. Fostering a culture rooted in constructive dialogue and mutual respect not only strengthens interpersonal relationships but also lays the foundation for a harmonious and collaborative school environment.

Additionally, the implementation of innovative pedagogical practices focused on student empowerment is essential to cultivating an educational environment that encourages critical thinking, autonomy, and creativity among students. These practices seek to promote educational equity and empower young people to become active agents of change in their communities and societies. Creating and maintaining spaces for ongoing reflection, where the power dynamics present within the institution can be discussed openly and constructively, is essential to identifying areas for improvement and moving toward a more inclusive and equitable school culture. Likewise, training in education for power provides community members with the necessary tools to understand, challenge, and transform unjust power structures that may exist.

Ultimately, these reflections and proposals raise the need to rethink power structures in education and offer a hopeful vision of a school environment that values diversity, equal opportunities, and mutual respect. By creating an environment where every individual feels valued and empowered, the foundation is laid for holistic development that benefits individual students and contributes positively to education and society as a whole.

## CONCLUSIONS

The insights emerging from this study reveal that power is present and permeates every corner and facet of the educational institution, from the most everyday interactions to the crucial decisions that shape the future of the entire school community. It is undeniable that unbalanced and oppressive power dynamics can act as significant barriers to the holistic development of individuals by creating friction, tension, and conflict that ultimately undermine the quality and effectiveness of the education offered.

Despite the realities revealed, the proposals for transformative reflection and action presented in this study represent a path of hope while offering a tangible path toward building a school environment that is truly inclusive, democratic, and respectful. By embracing these proposals for change, the educational community has a unique opportunity to challenge established power structures, foster equity and the active participation of all its members and promote a school culture that celebrates diversity and constructive dialogue as fundamental pillars.

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#### **AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION**

Conceptualization: Giovanny Stiven Ramírez Mejía.  
Data curation: Giovanny Stiven Ramírez Mejía.  
Formal analysis: Giovanny Stiven Ramírez Mejía.  
Acquisition of funds: Giovanny Stiven Ramírez Mejía.  
Investigation: Giovanny Stiven Ramírez Mejía.  
Methodology: Giovanny Stiven Ramírez Mejía.  
Project management: Giovanny Stiven Ramírez Mejía.  
Resources: Giovanny Stiven Ramírez Mejía.  
Software: Giovanny Stiven Ramírez Mejía.  
Supervision: Giovanny Stiven Ramírez Mejía.  
Validation: Giovanny Stiven Ramírez Mejía.  
Visualization: Giovanny Stiven Ramírez Mejía.  
Writing - original draft: Giovanny Stiven Ramírez Mejía.  
Writing - proofreading and editing: Giovanny Stiven Ramírez Mejía.