

# Teachers, power relativism and partnership

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## **Background and objectives**

The project 'What teachers think about their power' was started in cooperation with student teachers in 1995 with semi-structured interviews among 22 kindergarten and comprehensive school teachers in Finland. We were interested in teachers' power thinking after realizing that ordinary teachers themselves rarely participated in discussions which dealt with education, power and teacherhood. In our first interviews we wanted to know

- how teachers conceive power and its meaning in human existence,
- what they think about their professional autonomy, and
- what they think about using power in their work with children and youth.

After that, several substudies including three surveys have been carried out (see Appendix 1).

One of the most important theoretical problems of the project is how to describe teachers' intellectual orientations to power in general and to use of power in educating young people. On the basis of the material collected in the project it is obvious, that there is no special consistent ways of power thinking shared by all teachers.

Although on certain issues, as in assessing decision makers and administrators, a great majority of teachers seem to agree with each other (see Nuutinen 1997a, 1997b, 1999), there appear, behind the official and quite consistent educational framework, in teachers' practical thinking, ideological differences, implying even conflicting ideas and, among other things, quite unexpected interpretations, for example, of small children's and youth's abilities to make decisions

and to take responsibility. This is not an unexpected finding, because power relations are constructed in everyday social settings and teachers make their decisions in unique situations in which also other parties influence on proceeding of the process, where using power takes place. However, we do not know very much about teachers' different dispositions in this respect. The aim of this article is to shed light on the issues, what kind of attitudes Finnish kindergarten and comprehensive school teachers have towards power in general philosophical meaning and how their attitudes are related to their ideas about partnership and using power.

## **About the methodology**

Teachers' attitudes towards power in a general, abstract meaning, were measured in surveys with the semantic differential (Osgood 1969), which is a quantitative scale technique using opposite attributes describing the object of attitude (example next page). This method implies similar difficulties than the Likert technique discussed, for example, by Ronkainen (1999) and Toivonen & Haavio (1969; see also Edwards 1957). Toivonen and Haavio (1969) made three successive surveys, which were similar except for the verbal formulations for don't know' or 'cannot say' - options and compared the results. They found out that the results of the factor analyses of these three surveys were different, although nothing had been changed except the verbal formulation of one option. Ronkainen criticizes social researches for not paying attention to different possible meanings of 'cannot say' -type answers and for treating them as quite useless nonclasses. Ronkainen mentions

that Likert - type techniques compel respondents to make choices between simplistic black or white options and do not leave room for a more reflective and complicated thinking (1999, 168). In the context of power research different verbal formulations for 'cannot say' -options and interpretations given to these formulations by researchers and respondents, can be related to a wider context of the power behavior. For example, making classifications and classifying as such imply use of power (Deschamps 1982 ). The decision to answer and choose one of the given options can be related to a wider conscious intention to influence on the construction of social representation and decision making. Withdrawing, not knowing or being unable to say

can be influential strategies ('The Silent Majority') or a way of self - protection.

In 1995 the teachers were requested in semi-structured interviews to describe their attitudes towards power by asking whether it was a good or a bad thing. The analysis of the semi-structured material suggested that there were a few teachers who thought that whether power was a good or a bad thing, *depended on who uses it, with what morality and with what results* (Nuutinen 1997). This point was first noticed in surveys (1996 - 97), in which teachers' attitudes towards power were measured with the semantic differential, by reformulating the alternative 'cannot say' into the form 'cannot say or both attributes are valid' (see the example below).

*Semantic differential (Example from version 1, survey 1996)*

Power is...

Creative	1	2	3	4	5	Destructive
Deceitful	1	2	3	4	5	Trustworthy
Repressive	1	2	3	4	5	Liberating

(totally 14 items)

1 = fully agree with the left attribute	4 = almost agree with the right attribute
2 = almost agree with the left attribute	5 = fully agree with the right attribute
3 = cannot say or both attributes are valid	

*Semantic differential: version 2 (1999)*

Power is...

Creative	1	2	3	4	5	Destructive
Deceitful	1	2	3	4	5	Trustworthy
Repressive	1	2	3	4	5	Liberating

(totally 14 items)

1 = fully agree with the left attribute	4 = almost agree with the right attribute
2 = almost agree with the left attribute	5 = fully agree with the right attribute
3 = cannot say or both attributes are valid	

Table 1 shows how the proportion of 'cannot say' -answers decreases, when the teachers were offered an opportunity to express their relativistic attitude. The possible consequences of the result are interesting. If we choose this perspective, most of the 'cannot say' teachers cannot be regarded as not knowing or neutral, as persons

without a clear attitude, but rather as actors reflecting more or less actively in different contexts. They can adopt and change attitudes on the basis of moral assessment or of calculations of power positions, means, ends and results. (Nuutinen 2000)

Table 1 - Percentages of 'cannot say or both' -answers (Surveys 1996, 1997 and 1999; ranges on 14 items)

	Survey -96	Survey -97	Survey - 99
'Cannot say ...'	29.0 - 49.1	27.8 - 53.2	0.3 - 3.4
Both positive and negative (relativistic; separated from cannot say option)			21.4 - 39.4

At first, in the following pages a report is given how 1 the teachers, who participated in the survey in 1999 were classified into three types according to their attitudes towards power. Then the different teacher groups' beliefs and opinions about education, power and partnership will be described on the basis of the cross-tabulations and two factor analyses. Finally the typology of teachers' power thinking will be compared to the teacher types constructed in the earlier study presented at the ERNAPE conference in 1999, in Amsterdam.

### Classification of the teachers

From the point of view of the semantic differential method, which is a quantitative scale technique, the solution used in version 2 is not acceptable. That is why in the further analysis 'cannot say' and relativistic options are reunited. Yet, it is good to remember that there are not very many teachers who 'cannot say', if the relativistic option is available.

In order to classify teachers, a sum variable based on 14 items of semantic differential was constructed, the sums were divided with the number of items and further classified in three

classes according to teachers' attitudes to power in general (variable ATTCLASS/ATTTYPE). The classes are

1. teachers with positive attitudes (values 1 - 2.33; 22.0% of all),
2. relativistic/uncertain teachers (values 2.34 - 3.67; 67.6% of all) and
3. teachers with negative attitudes towards power (values 3.68 - 5; 10.4% of all).

The teachers with positive attitudes towards power are tending to think that power can be characterized as a natural, systematic, creative, useful, cooperative, reasonable, emphatic etc. phenomenon, while the teachers with negative attitudes describe it with opposite attributes and think that it is as such a harmful phenomenon . The relativistic/uncertain teachers tend to choose both negative and positive attributes and to condition their choice to a wider situational context. However, this classification needs further developing because the current sum variable does not differentiate relativistic/uncertain teachers from those who have chosen variably *extreme* positive and negative options and thus are different from those who choose option 'both attributes are valid'.

Chi square -tests related to the cross tabulations of ATTYPE by age ( $p = .604$ ), school level ( $p = .616$ ) and rural vs. urban teachers ( $p = .700$ ) did not show any statistically significant differences in regard to teacher types. The value of the significance in the cross tabulation of ATTYPE by gender slightly exceeds the lowest acceptable value of significance .05 (Chi square = 5.825;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = .054$ ). The comparison between the female and the male teachers' distributions show

that the proportion of female teachers is smaller among type 1 teachers (positive attitudes) and larger among type 3 teachers (negative attitudes towards power) than that of male teachers. In the following analysis the main questions are whether these teacher types think differently about power issues in education, and especially how relativistic/uncertain teachers' thinking could be characterized.

Table 2 - Percentages of teachers agreeing with the claims about the meaning of power for humans and society\*

	Positive	Relativistic/ uncertain	Negative	p
The social life would be continuous chaos without power.	60.3	<b>64.3</b>	35.2	.002
Solidarity and good will are typical of all humans.	59.7	<b>32.6</b>	37.8	.001
Those with power are exceptionally talented.	44.9	26.2	10.8	.002
The citizens are divided by the power structure of the society into those who subjugate and those who submit.	39.8	61.7	73.0	.024
All humans are born free and equal.	43.6	<b>30.8</b>	32.4	.018
Men are more dominating than women by nature.	44.9	<b>48.3</b>	45.9	.616
All humans are submissive by nature	24.4	27.1	27.0	.547
Children are altruistic and do not want power.	34.6	<b>19.2</b>	37.8	.053

\* Table is based on wider cross tabulations and Chi square - tests.

Table 2 shows that the opinions of the different teacher types can fluctuate without any clear consistency depending on the item in question. The relativistic/uncertain teacher group seems to favor a middle- of- the- road position on items 3 and 4. This group is more positive than the positive type teachers in the item 'The social life were continuous chaos without power' ( 1 ) and

more negative than negative type teachers in items (2, 5, 8) about human nature.

In all three surveys a very large majority of the teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with the politicians and administrators (Nuutinen 1999). Differences in the opinions about the suitability of the amount of power of different partners between teacher types are shown in table 3.

Table 3 - Percentage of teachers wishing for changes in different partners' amount of power by types\*

	Positive (T1)	Relativistic/ uncertain (T2)	Negative (T3)	p =
School/social service board	39.7	43.9	48.1	.665
Politicians (municipal level)	61.6	67.2	89.3	.022
Politicians (state level)	46.6	55.5	82.1	.006
Administrators (municipal level)	53.4	50.9	78.6	.041
Administrators (state level)	42.5	47.3	75.0	.059
Headmaster	36.1	42.0	50.0	.341
Colleagues	45.2	40.0	44.4	.014
Children	26.0	27.9	28.6	.543
Parents	28.8	37.0	42.9	.439

\*Table is based on wider cross tabulations and Chi square - tests.

There is quite a large proportion of teachers in every teacher type who wish for changes in different partners amount of power: 1) positive type ranging from 26% to 61.6%, 2) relativistic /uncertain type from 27.9 % to 67.2 % and 3) negative type from 28.6 % to 89.3% (Table 3). The relativistic/uncertain teachers represent a middle- of- the- road attitude. The general trend remains the same as in the earlier surveys: the teachers are less satisfied with the amount of

power of politicians and administrators than with that of partners working at school/kindergarten and parents. In addition to that, as shown in Table 4, most of them would like to reduce politicians' and administrators' power and to increase the other (grassroot) partners' power (Nuutinen 1997a, 1997b, 1999). Yet, there are intragroup differences in teachers' opinions about whether the power of above mentioned partners should be increased or reduced.

Table 4 - Percentage of teachers wishing for different partners' power to be increased (+) or reduced (-) by types\*

	Positive (T1)		Relativistic/ uncertain (T2)		Negative (T3)	
	+	-	+	-	+	-
School/social service board	15.1	24.7	18.0	25.9	11.1	37.0
Politicians (municipal level)	12.3	49.3	6.1	61.1	14.3	75.0
Politicians (state level)	9.6	37.0	5.7	49.8	17.9	64.2
Administrators (municipal level)	20.5	32.9	14.5	36.4	17.9	60.7
Administrators (state level)	9.6	32.9	11.1	36.3	17.9	57.1
Headmaster	29.2	6.9	30.5	11.5	28.6	21.4
Colleagues	45.2	0.0	31.7	8.3	44.4	0.0
Children	20.5	5.5	20.5	7.4	28.6	0.0
Parents	21.9	6.8	29.1	7.8	39.3	3.6

\*Table is based on wider cross tabulations and Chi square – tests

### The teacher types and the issues of power in education

#### Factor analysis 1

In the survey of 1999 teachers' thoughts about power in education were measured with 21 Likert-type items (Appendix 2), of which twelve were chosen in two factor analyses. The aim of the first analysis was 1) to find out what kind of latent variables could be extracted from twelve variables chosen and 2) to compare the teacher types with the help of these new variables. The

first analysis included all cases ( $n = 364$ ). A four-factor solution was accepted on the basis of eigenvalues, factor scores were computed and the means of the scores of the different teacher types were compared with the one-way variance analysis.

On the grounds of the highest loadings the first latent variable (factor 1; see Table 5) is named as *Factor of Professional Power 1* emphasizing teacher expertise and the kindergarten's or school's aims over parents' and students' opinions.

Table 5 - Factor of Professional Power vs. Partnership 1 (factor 1).

Variables	Loadings
The parents do not understand the teacher's work well enough to be able to say how their children should be educated (24).	0.604
The teachers who allow pupils to participate in planning their work mislead them, because the kindergarten/school cannot work on the basis of pupils wishes (22).	0.560
My pupils cannot tell their needs for learning and education (21)	0.548
If the use of power helps to reach the goals of learning and education, the teacher can use also severe methods (23).	0.446
Laymen, e.g. parents, should avoid teaching school matters to children, because they usually do not know the proper methods (13).	0.405

A comparison of the factor score means of the different teacher types points out that relativistic/uncertain teachers put more stress on professional

power than the other types (the difference between the positive and the relativistic/uncertain type is significant at statistical level  $p = .016$ ).

Table 6 - Factor of Didactic Authority 1 (factor 2)

Variables	Loadings
The teachers have to take care that pupils internalize the goals of the kindergarten/school (4).	0.814
The teachers have to know their subject so well that the pupils cannot question their authority (5).	0.482

The second latent variable is named as *Factor of Didactic Authority 1* emphasizing teachers' duties as a mediators of the goals of formal education to the children and as authorities of the curriculum

(Table 5). The value of the relativistic/uncertain teacher type's factor score mean is a 'middle-of-the-road' - value. The positive and negative type teachers differ at the statistically significant level.

Table 7 - Factor of Power Conflicts 1 (factor 3)

Variables	Loadings
The teacher's moral principles and use of power often contradict each other in the kindergarten/school work (29).	0.546
Nowadays the teachers lack means to solve various kinds of children's problems (28).	0.499
The goals of the kindergarten/school and the children's needs match (3).	-0.436
At present self- discipline is not emphasized enough by Finnish education (25).	0.385

The third factor, *Factor of Power Conflicts 1* refers to teachers' difficulties to adapt to the aims and principles of formal education and the use of power while interacting with young people (Table 7). Of the different teacher types the

relativistic/uncertain group stresses the power conflicts most. The difference between them and positive type teachers is significant at .000 -level. The negative type teachers' factor score mean is quite near the value of the relativistic/uncertain type.

Table 8 - Factor of Partnership and Limits of Expert Power 1 (factor 4)

Variables	Loadings
It is the most advantageous for the child to have two separate territories, home and kindergarten/school (19)	0.925
[Laymen, e.g. parents, should avoid teaching school matters to children, because they usually do not know the proper methods (13)].	(-0.225)

Only one variable was highly loaded on factor 4 stressing the separateness of kindergarten/school and home (*Factor of Partnership and Limits of Expert Power 1*; Table 8). The negative loading of variable 13 suggests idea that the possible latent variable could deal with partnership - non partnership dimension related to the limits of stressing professional expertise. No statistically significant differences between teacher types were found.

### Factor analysis 2

Factor analysis 2 with the same items used in the first analysis, was limited to the relativistic/uncertain teachers (n = 224). A four factor solution was accepted on the basis of eigenvalues in this case too, and except for a few changes in the factors' percentages of variance the interpretations of the latent variables and naming of the factors have remained the same as in the analysis 1. In analysis 2, factor scores with means and ANOVA were computed in order to describe how the relativistic/uncertain teachers differ from each other on latent variables when gender, age and school level are taken into account.

Table 9 - Significance of subgroup differences on latent variables factor score means (ANOVA)

	Gender p =	Age p =	School level p =
Professional Power vs. Partnership 2	.060	.121	.000
Didactic Authority 2	.889	.000	.000
Partnership and Limits of Expert Power 2	.849	.856	.528
Power Conflicts 2	.401	.208	.000

As seen in Table 9 there are not any statistically significant differences between male and female relativist/uncertain teachers on latent variables. The relativist/uncertain teachers of different age and school levels disagree on the issue of didactic authority. The teachers who are 50 years old or younger emphasize didactic authority less than those over 50 years of age. In addition to the didactic authority, the school level subgroup differences also appear on factors of Professional Power vs. Partnership 2 and Power Conflicts 2. Post hoc -tests point out that relativist/uncertain kindergarten teachers stress professional power, didactic authority and power conflicts less than comprehensive school lower and upper level teachers.

#### **Power attitudes and sharing power: a comparison of the two typologies**

In the earlier article (Nuutinen 1999) three teacher types were presented: those who were 1) positively, 2) reservedly and 3) negatively disposed to the parents' expertise and power

partnership. Of all teachers 22.2% belonged to the positively disposed type, 68.1% to the reserved type and 9.7% to the negatively disposed type. The teachers who participated in the survey in 1999 were classified using the same method. Now the proportion of the positively disposed teachers was larger than earlier (37.8%) which consequently implied fewer cases for the other types (T2/reserved 58.2%, T3/negative 4.0% ). A comparison by sex, age, school level and position (headmaster/ordinary teacher) points out statistically significant differences between different age groups (the oldest teachers have a reserved or negative orientation more often), between school levels (comprehensive school upper level teachers are reservedly or negatively orientated more often) and between ordinary teachers and headmasters (the latter are less reserved and show no negative disposition at all). An interesting question is how teachers' power attitudes and sharing power with parents are related. The divisions of the two typologies were cross tabulated. As shown in Table 10

Table 10 - Cross tabulation of the two teacher typologies (% of all; n = 329)

	Sharing power Type 1 (positive)	Sharing power Type 2 (reserved)	Sharing power Type 3 (negative)
Positive attitudes to power (T 1)	12.2	9.1	0.6
Relativistic attitudes (T2)	23.1	43.2	3.8
Negative attitudes (T3)	3.3	4.9	0.3

Type 2/2 (relativistic/uncertain and reserved) is the most general, almost every second teacher was classified into this group. A little more than every fifth teacher belongs to the type 2/1 (relativistic/uncertain power attitude and positive orientation to the parents). About every tenth teacher was positively disposed both to power and parents, and almost the same proportion positively to power but reservedly to the parents.

### Discussion

The starting point of the study of teachers' power attitudes suggested that ordinary methods of measuring attitudes towards power ought to be complemented with a method which is able to differentiate types and styles beyond 'cannot say', 'don't know' etc. options. The solution used here is rough, but fruitful, and can be developed further.

Two thirds of all kindergarten and comprehensive school teachers who participated in the survey in 1999 were classified in the class of the relativistic/uncertain teachers. One can conclude that a majority of teachers seem to avoid extreme stands and possibly adapt and change attitudes in a process, in which they reflect their roles in power relations, morality or the rules of use of power, and calculate potential results of the use of power. However, the relativistic/uncertain teachers are not consistently 'middle of the road' persons. From certain aspects, this group seems to conceive the meaning of power for humans even more negatively than the negative type teachers. The two factor analyses which showed that four factors could be extracted from the variables measuring teachers' opinions and beliefs about power and education, also point towards similar tendencies. Analysis 1, which included all cases, made explicit the factors of professional power vs. partnership, didactic authority, power conflicts and partnership and limits of expert power. The above metaphor of the relativistic teachers as 'middle of the road' persons fits to the factor of didactic authority well, but not the factors of professional power vs. partnership and power

conflicts and partnership, which were given more emphasis by this than by the other teacher types.

In her study Ronkainen found out that the 'cannot-say' type hesitation and uncertainty were related to gender, action culture and age. Women, people working in rural vocations and elder people gave more often 'cannot say' answers than men, people in urban vocations or younger people, and this tendency seemed to be quite consistent on different subject areas (1999, 170 - 171). On the basis of this study the proportion of female teachers is smaller in the group of teachers with positive power attitudes and larger in the group that is negatively disposed to power. Yet, gender does not make a big difference at the more specified level of the teachers' power thinking. Age, teacher position and especially the school level seemed to be more meaningful background variables than gender even among the relativist/uncertain teachers also in the 1999 survey.

The analysis points out that also in 1999 majorities of kindergarten and comprehensive school teachers criticized politicians and administrators as power partners, as they did in the earlier surveys. Further, at general level they seemed to appreciate children, parents and colleagues as power partners, and also expressed reservedness when sharing expertise and power with parents was dealt with at a more specific level (see Nuutinen 1999). The latest results point out that the most typical teacher orientation to power in general, philosophical meaning (the relativistic/uncertain power disposition) was in the most cases combined with a reserved disposition to the co-operation with parents. However, in the second largest group power relativism/uncertainty was related to positive attitude towards partnership with parents, and on the whole the proportion of the teachers with positive attitude towards parents was larger than in the survey 1997 too. It is possible that some positive partnership developments have taken place, but it is too early to make any far reaching

conclusions of these findings, since, for example, a few unpublished material point out that more often than earlier teachers criticize parents for not taking enough responsibility and being confused

as educators. This can be a sign of polarization of dispositions due to increased public discussion on the children's and youth's problems in Finland.

### Literature

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