

Between equality and authoritarianism: daily interaction in the development of knowledge construction in the classroom

Entre la igualdad y el autoritarismo: la interacción cotidiana en el desarrollo de la construcción del conocimiento en el salón de clases

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Classification:

Area: Humanities and Behavioral Sciences
Field: Pedagogy
Discipline: Educational theory and methods
Subdiscipline: Evaluation of students

https://doi.org/10.35429/JSR.2025.11.27.1.1.9

History of the article:

Received: October 30, 2025

Accepted: December 30, 2025

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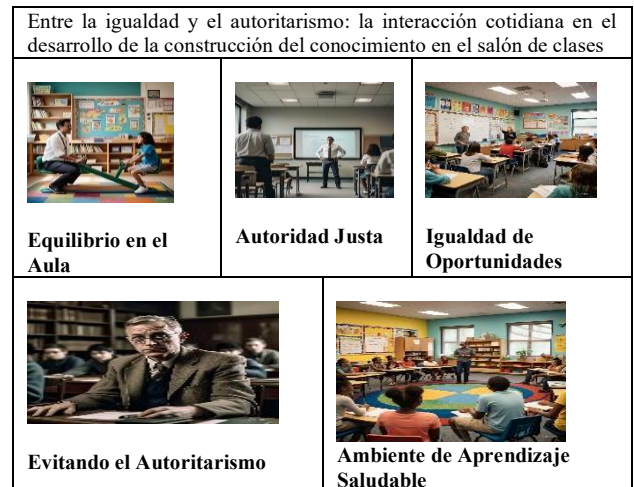


Abstract

The classroom environment can be considered to develop in a balance between authority and equality between teacher and student. This situation creates a healthy, productive environment, where teachers exercise their authority fairly and equitably, ensuring that students have equal opportunities for academic success. At the same time, authoritarianism must be avoided. In this work, using a mixed methodology, we determine, through semantics, the words that characterize the classroom environment at the undergraduate engineering level. Between equality and authoritarianism: daily interaction in the development of knowledge construction in the classroom level.

Resumen:

Se puede considerar que el ambiente en un salón de clases se desarrolla en un equilibrio entre la autoridad y la igualdad entre el docente y el alumno. Esta situación da pie a un ambiente saludable sano y productivo, en donde el docente ejerce de forma justa y equitativa su autoridad, de manera que el estudiante tenga las mismas oportunidades de éxito académico, al mismo tiempo se debe evitar caer en un autoritarismo, considerando lo anterior, en este trabajo mediante una metodología mixta determinamos por medio de la semántica, las palabras que caracterizan el ambiente de un salón de clase a nivel licenciatura en ingeniería.



Equality, Authoritarianism, Environment, Interaction

Igualdad, Autoritarismo, Ambiente, Interacción

Area: Promotion of frontier research and basic science in all fields of knowledge

Citation: Ortiz- y Ojeda, Pedro Tomás, Ortiz-Sánchez, Pedro Alfonso Guadalupe, Sánchez-Iturbe, Patricia Guadalupe and Basave-Torres, Rosy Ilda. [2025]. Between equality and authoritarianism: daily interaction in the development of knowledge construction in the classroom. Journal of Social Researches. 11[27]1-9: e11127109.



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Introduction

In a social group such as the classroom, there is intense interaction between its members, in this case between the student and the teacher. This dialogue is full of interactions through which knowledge is constructed. It can be considered to oscillate between equality, as it is a human quality between two beings that is legally and naturally endorsed. However, the knowledge to be transmitted disrupts this, often leading to the imposition of an implicit logic for the construction of knowledge, which can be transformed into an imposition of ideas and conceptions [Ames Ramello, 2020], [Child Development, 2020].

This phenomenon characterises teaching practice, as it is in this way that teachers transmit their beliefs, values and perspectives to students, often without allowing for debate or critical reflection. This imposition manifests itself in different ways, through the selection of content, the way of teaching, and expectations about students' responses and behaviour [Masschelein, J., & Simons, M., 2020].

Thus, the selection of content is characterised by the teacher's choice of topics to be addressed during teaching and also those to be omitted, defined by beliefs and values, which limits students' exposure to and learning of the teacher's perspectives and knowledge [Brain, 2020].

The teacher's conception of how to present information is typified by the teaching method; if this process is carried out in an authoritarian manner, it discourages active and critical participation by students [Complutense University of Madrid [UCM], 2020].

Another activity within the classroom is assessment and its respective feedback, which is characterised according to the teacher's conceptions of the content taught, accepting as good those answers that align with their ideas and conceptions and penalising those that do not meet this condition [Álvarez Martínez, 2023; Diker, 2023].

The imposition of ideas and conceptions can be considered to have profound implications for students' cognitive and critical development. To analyse these teacher-student relationships in the classroom, several theoretical frameworks can be used, including the following:

Critical theory is based on the idea of challenging power structures by using the ability to question the educational process. According to Paulo Freire, education should be liberating in the sense of empowering students to ask questions in order to transform reality, rather than accepting imposed ideas [García, 2021].

Within the socio-historical current, according to De la Cruz Flores [2022], there is the so-called social representation, where the ideas and beliefs shared by a social group influence the way people perceive and act in the world. In education, teachers influence the way they teach and represent content. This theory was developed by Serge Moscovici.

The ruling classes also impose their vision through schools, so that certain values and norms are taught in the classroom, which of course favour the dominant perspective among others. Antonio Gramsci developed this theoretical framework. Likewise, according to Jürgen Habermas' theory, communication in the classroom should take place in an environment free of coercion and should be oriented towards mutual understanding, where the imposition of ideas is seen as a distortion of authentic communication, characterised by dialogue and the active participation of students.

On a daily basis, teachers tend to generate theories regarding beliefs and assumptions about the teaching and learning process, which influence the way classes are structured and how ideas and concepts are transmitted and imposed on students, considering this situation as the existence of implicit theories or beliefs in teachers. In general terms, beliefs and theories offer different perspectives for analysing how ideas and concepts are imposed in the classroom, and can be useful for reflecting on pedagogical practices and promoting equitable and critical education. Daily interaction in the classroom can be analysed by considering different theoretical frameworks, including:

Critical theory, González [2020] considered above, is a perspective based on the Frankfurt School, which considers that the educational context reproduces inequalities and perpetuates dominant ideologies, in which the imposition of ideas by teachers is considered a form of ideological control, which focuses on analysing emancipation and criticism of structures of power and domination.

On the other hand, constructivist theory considers that the imposition of ideas can be counterproductive, as it limits students' ability to create and develop their own understanding and critical thinking, considering that learning is an active process in which students construct their knowledge through experience and reflection.

Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu's theory in the context of education considers that the educational process is a reflection of society and also a mechanism of social reproduction that maintains cultural and economic inequalities [Bourdieu, 1977].

It is established that the field of education is a social space in which power relations are developed by establishing rules and formalities during the educational process and the reproduction of cultural, social or symbolic capital that define the success or failure of the act of intellectual training.

He considers that power relations in the field of education are imposed by language, culture and symbols, without direct physical coercion, but through the expectations of the ruling class by means of norms and values, so that the socially disadvantaged internalise a feeling of inferiority or irrelevance.

Bourdieu establishes the concept of habitus as a set of dispositions or patterns of perception, ways of thinking or acting that individuals develop during their existence, due to the social context or the place where they are carried out, which consequently influences individual expectations, the development of practices and the chances of success in the activities they undertake.

In addition, the socio-historical theory developed by Lev Vygotsky can be included in the analysis as a conceptual framework. This theory considers the importance of the social and cultural context in cognitive development, viewing learning as a socially mediated process in which language and social interaction play an important role, and where the imposition of ideas is considered a form of mediation that influences the construction of knowledge.

In this theory, the influence of the social and academic environment is fundamental to people's cognitive development.

It is characterised by the consideration that mediation occurs through cultural tools such as language, symbols and objects, which are used to interact with the environment more effectively and enable the development of higher cognitive functions [Vygotsky, 1978].

The same author believes that there is a gap between what a child can do on their own and what they can do with the help of an adult or a more capable peer, which he calls the zone of proximal development [ZPD]. He considers that effective teaching occurs within this zone, where adequate support helps to achieve a higher level of understanding and ability.

Internalisation is a higher cognitive function for Vygotsky, which develops first at a social level called interpsychological, and then internalises at an individual level called intrapsychological, meaning that social interactions are fundamental to cognitive development.

Furthermore, this author recognises that language is a crucial tool in the development of thought. In addition to facilitating communication, it allows for the structuring of thought and problem solving.

Thus, by evaluating language and interactions in the classroom, valuable information can be obtained about the conditions of equality and authoritarianism in the classroom. Teachers and students can also be observed in their use of language to reveal power dynamics and opportunities for participation and learning.

Vygotsky's theory has various applications in educational development, in that it allows for the analysis and development of collaborative teaching processes to establish activities where students work together and support each other in problem solving and knowledge building [Vygotsky, 1995].

According to this theory, in many cases, in order to carry out learning activities, it is necessary to build temporary support called scaffolding, which allows it to be adjusted to the student's needs until they can perform the task independently.

As would be the case when students learn to solve equations, the so-called Zone of Proximal Development [ZPD] of each student is identified and then scaffolding is provided, such as clues or guided examples to understand and appropriate the process. As students gain confidence and skill, support is gradually reduced so that students can solve equations independently.

Methodology

To analyse everyday interaction in the development of knowledge construction in the classroom, an initial analysis is made of an epistemic view based on positivism and post-positivism, characterised by objectivity and the measurement of study variables, such as behaviour patterns, academic performance, and other observable variables using surveys, standardised tests, and other statistical processes, taking into account the verification of the hypothesis and the generalisation of the results using representative samples [Villareal, E. et al. [2021]; Rivas, J., 2023].

Another approach is to consider qualitative methodology, which operates under constructivism and interpretation, emphasising a deep understanding of the phenomenon studied from the perspective of the participants. In the case of the classroom, it is considered to explore the experiences, perceptions, and meanings of teachers and students in their daily interactions through interviews, observations, and content analysis to capture the complexity and richness of all interactions [Alvarez, 2003]

By combining qualitative and quantitative methodology, a more comprehensive approach to educational phenomena can be achieved in terms of epistemic pragmatism, in which the usefulness and applicability of the methods in the research questions are assessed, explaining what happens in quantitative terms and also why and how it happens, which is provided by the qualitative method.

Daily interaction can then be investigated through dialogue and collaboration between teachers and students in the construction of knowledge, highlighting joint participation in activities relevant to cognitive development. This can be analysed with reference to the cultural and historical activity characterised by Vygotsky's theory.

Individual behaviour is related to semantic memory, as it is considered potentially generative because it organises knowledge of words and other verbal symbols, as well as their meaning, referents and the relationships between them [Sánchez-Gómez, et. al., 2022].

Thus, the method of collecting information using semantic networks constitutes a mixed procedure, both quantitative and qualitative in nature, the model of natural semantic networks proposed by: Alvarez, 2003, [Briones, 2001] addresses meaning directly by providing an explanation of the approach through conceptual nodes that form the network.

With the aim of investigating the interpretation of the teacher-student relationship, a group of students was asked to answer the question: How would you describe the treatment you receive in your personal interaction with your teacher? This question was asked to a group of 30 first-semester students who were beginning their engineering studies and were enrolled in a mathematics course at the end of the semester. They were asked to provide five defining words and classify them according to a hierarchy, assigning a score of one to the most accurate and five to the least accurate. The following table shows the responses.

Box 1

Table 1

Defining words

Gender	WORDS THAT RESPONDED				
	1	2	3	4	5
M	Justice	Justice	Equity	Domination	Respect
M	Dictatorship	Totalitarianism	Equality	Justice	Fairness
M	Inclusion	Absolutism	Inclusion	Absolutism	Totalitarianism
F	Despotism	Equity	Arbitrary	Intolerance	Coercion
M	Dictatorship	Repression	Impartiality	Repression	Justice
M	Equity	Inclusion	Dictatorship	Inclusion	Coercion
M	Censorship	Justice	Intolerance	Imposition	Despotism
M	Inclusion	Dictatorship	Parity	Inclusion	Solidarity
M	Equity	Neutrality	Justice	Totalitarianism	Fairness
M	Despotism	Justice	Imposition	Dictatorship	Tolerance
F	Parity	Recognition	Repression	Justice	Dictatorship
M	Balance	Impartiality	Equity	Oppression	Solidarity
M	Justice	Control	Censorship	Despotism	Fairness
M	Balance	Equity	Inclusion	Parity	Equality
M	Despotism	Absolutism	Coercion	Neutrality	Dictatorship
F	Inclusion	Justice	Dictatorship	Equity	Intolerance
M	Oppression	Totalitarianism	Fraternity	Fraternity	Repression
M	Equity	Despotism	Equity	Censorship	Impartiality
M	Oppression	Parity	Balance	Inclusion	Fairness
M	Impartiality	Justice	Dictatorship	Fraternity	Neutrality
M	Inclusion	Repression	Parity	Justice	Dictatorship
F	Neutrality	Totalitarianism	Uniformity	Uniformity	Justice
M	Totalitarianism	Equity	Totalitarianism	Equity	Balance
M	Repression	Dictatorship	Despotism	Intolerance	Despotism
M	Equity	Despotism	Impartiality	Absolutism	Fairness
M	Despotism	Justice	Fraternity	Despotism	Dictatorship
M	Repression	Absolutism	Parity	Repression	Totalitarianism
M	Equity	Dictatorship	Uniformity	Equity	Parity
M	Despotism	Totalitarianism	Impartiality	Totalitarianism	Tolerance
M	Impartiality	Parity	Repression	Dictatorship	Absolutism
M	Impartiality	Subjugation	Equity	Absolutism	Fraternity

Source: Own elaboration.

As can be seen in the table above, the atmosphere surrounding the daily interaction between students and teachers is described, where there is mutual respect and collaboration between both protagonists of the pedagogical act, in which the role of the teacher was that of a facilitator rather than the traditional role of an authoritarian figure.

The aim was to create an environment of comfortable participation, where opinions could be expressed without fear of judgement, sharing ideas in a two-way flow of communication between the teacher and the students, always attentive to feedback, characterising mistakes as learning opportunities rather than failures, and encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning, with the idea of fostering critical thinking and autonomy.

The atmosphere was not controlled by a hierarchical relationship in which the teacher had unquestionable authority and the students felt they had less freedom to express themselves.

It was also important to avoid communication flowing from the teacher to the students with little feedback from the students, where the teacher makes all the decisions and the students must follow them without question, and where obedience and compliance with rules often come at the expense of creativity and active participation, preventing anxiety or fear of making mistakes, which can inhibit their learning and participation [Pérez, 2022].

Results

After identifying the key concepts to include in the analysis of the research question, the information was collected as mentioned in the previous paragraph. With the data obtained, the concepts were identified to construct the relationship of a semantic network. There are various methodologies for performing this action, from natural language processing [NLP] techniques, in which concepts and relationships are extracted from the data, to digital tools such as Gephi or NodeXL.

A graphical representation of nodes and relationships as edges in a graph can be used, using specialised software such as Gephi or NodeXL. However, due to the characteristics of the research, the methodology referred to in Figueroa, et. al. [1981] called natural semantic networks is used.

In this methodology, the words that define the answers to the research question are classified into hierarchies from 1 to 5 by each of the participants, as shown in Table 1.

The number of these hierarchies per participant is multiplied by their semantic value, that is, the multiplication of the frequency of occurrence per hierarchy obtained by each of the defining words, indicating the semantic weight of each of the defining words, as shown in Table 2 below.

Box 2

Table 2

Semantic Categories

ESTABLISHMENT OF SEMANTIC CATEGORIES										
		valxjerar		valxjerar		valxjerar		valxjerar	Also, the valxjerar	
VALUES[val]	5		4		3		2		1	
HIERARCHIES[hi er]	1		2		3		4		5	
1. Dictatorship	2	10	3	12	3	9	2	4	4	39
2. Despotism	5	25	2	8	1	3	2	4	2	42
3. Totalitarianism	1	5	4	16	1	3	2	4	2	30
4. Absolutism	0	0	3	12	0	0	1	2	1	15
5. Repression	2	10	2	8	2	6	2	4	1	29
6. Censorship	1	5	0	0	1	3	1	2	0	10
7. Oppression	1	5	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	7
8. Imposition	0	0	0	0	1	3	1	2	0	5
9. Intolerance	0	0	0	0	1	3	2	4	1	8
10. Coercion	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	2	5
11. Arbitrariness	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	3
12. Domination	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	2
13. Control	0	0	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	4
14. Subjugation	0	0	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	4
15. Equity	5	25	3	12	4	12	3	6	5	60
16. Justice	1	5	6	24	1	3	3	6	2	40
17. Inclusion	4	20	1	4	2	6	3	6	0	36
18. Parity	1	5	2	8	3	9	1	2	1	25
19. Impartiality	3	15	1	4	3	9	0	0	1	29
20. Balance	2	10	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	13
21. Neutrality	1	5	1	4	0	0	1	2	1	12
22. Uniformity	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	2
23. Fraternity	0	0	0	0	2	6	2	4	1	11
24. Equality	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	1	4
25. Solidarity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
26. Tolerance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
27. Recognition	0	0	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	4
28. Respect	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
sum of hierarchies	29		31		29		29		29	

Five individual words corresponding to the research question stimulus were considered. In the response process, all students developed the hierarchy individually, avoiding free association, with five minutes given to establish the concept, seeking to generate greater hierarchical richness.

As a result of the evaluation of the values and hierarchies in Table 1, the hierarchies that obtained the highest values are located and presented in Table 2, which can be grouped within the concept of authoritarianism, representing their position from the highest value with their respective percentage.

Box 3**Table 3**

Authoritarianism

Authoritarianism		
Defining words	Value	Percentage
Despotism	42	100
Dictatorship	39	92.8571429
Totalitarianism	30	71.4285714
Repression	29	69.047619
Absolutism	15	35.7142857
Censorship	10	23.8095238
Intolerance	8	19.047619
Oppression	7	16.6666667
Imposition	5	11.9047619
Coercion	5	11.9047619

Source: Own elaboration.

With a score of 42 and 100 per cent, the concept of despotism indicates that interaction with the teacher tends to be arbitrary and that the group does not participate in decisions regarding the group's leadership. It is considered that absolute power is exercised without any restrictions, whether regulatory or institutional, and that this power is arbitrary, tyrannical and exercised by a single person.

In the case of the word dictatorship, it had a score of 39 and the associated percentage was 92.85%. In this assessment, it is considered that only the teacher governs and manages pedagogical development, without participation in the class for consensus building.

A percentage of 71.42% considers that the interaction between pedagogical actors in the classroom can be described as totalitarianism, as they consider that the teacher controls everything through warnings and proposals that are disadvantageous to the development of the teaching activity, as well as repressive actions that generate resentment.

Repressive action in the classroom, estimated to occur with a frequency of 29% to 69.04%, takes place in the school environment with the application of exaggerated order, with actions to silence and contradict spontaneous participation, and with remarks that affect good relations between students and the teacher.

The feeling that the teacher has absolute power was reported by 35.71% of respondents, who felt that the teacher is not governed by the laws or regulations established for the proper conduct of educational activities.

Censorship also occurs in 23.80% of cases, in the form of the suppression or prohibition of independent activities in education, such as watching videos, reading information other than notes, and limiting opinions. However, the existence of an unwillingness on the part of the teacher to accept different opinions, beliefs or behaviours was expressed by 19.04% of students, who described it as intolerance, a characteristic that is reflected in societies considered to be closed and authoritarian.

Apparently, 16.66% feel oppressed, as they consider that the teacher's authority is exercised unfairly and, to a certain extent, cruelly, considering that their fundamental rights and freedoms are denied.

On the other hand, 11.90% consider the impositive way of establishing a topic or act, as on some occasions it was interpreted and felt to be forced or authoritarian, causing resistance or social conflict as a reaction.

Similarly, 11.90% of students mentioned the use of force or threats, relating them to the use of force or threats to compel them to do something against their will, to a certain extent to ensure obedience and control of the class group. In the case of the other external factor analysed, namely equality, the following results were obtained, using the same compilation as in Table 2 from Table 1:

Box 4**Table 4**

Equality

Equality		
Defining words	Value	Percentage
Equity	60	100
Justice	40	66.6666667
Impartiality	29	48.3333333
Parity	25	41.6666667
Balance	13	21.6666667
Neutrality	12	20
Fraternity	11	18.3333333
Equality	4	6.6666667
Recognition	4	6.6666667
Solidarity	2	3.3333333

Source: Own elaboration.

According to the table above, the score of 60, which corresponds to 100 per cent of responses, refers to equity, which is the fairness and impartiality with which treatment, resources and opportunities are provided, seeking to correct inequality in order to ensure access to reaching one's full potential. It is considered a fundamental principle in the fight against discrimination and social exclusion.

Justice has a representative value of 40 [66.66%], which implies that rights must be upheld and sanctions applied to those who violate them. It is considered that everyone should be given their due according to the law, ethics and morality. This concept is a fundamental element in any democratic society and is manifested in the judicial system, which seeks to resolve conflicts in an equitable and transparent manner.

The issue of impartiality was considered within the range of options with a percentage of 48.33, indicating that the quality of not showing favouritism towards any of the parties in a situation involves fair and objective decision-making, ensuring that everyone is heard.

Parity is a quality that refers to equality in terms of quantity, quality or status, with a value of 25 and a percentage of 41.66. It implies equal representation and participation of men and women in the classroom, in the sense of gender equality and the elimination of inequality gaps.

Balance is considered to be the state of equilibrium between the different elements that make up the relationship between teacher and student, considered as the harmony between the teacher's personal and professional life, as well as the equitable distribution of resources and emotional stability. It is considered to be the balance between individual and collective well-being. This word had a value of 13 and a percentage of 21.66.

Neutrality is characterised by the position of not taking sides in a conflict, which is very important in the academic context, where it should be characterised by maintaining objectivity and avoiding external influence, allowing one to act as a mediator and facilitate the fair resolution of conflicts. It was given a value of 12 and a percentage of 20.

The feeling of solidarity and brotherhood among people is described as fraternity. Students rated the feeling of cooperation, support, and sense of belonging to the classroom community with a value of 11 and a percentage of 18.33. In general terms, this concept aims to build more just and cohesive societies.

Equality is considered to mean that all people have the same rights and opportunities. This situation was rated with a value of 4 and a percentage of 6.66 per cent. In this sense, the aim is to promote inclusion in the classroom by eliminating inequalities and promoting inclusion without discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, religion and sexual orientation, among others.

Recognition, which values and respects the identity, achievements, and contributions of others, has the same percentage and value as equality. This condition develops self-esteem and a sense of belonging, which fosters an environment of inclusion and motivation.

Finally, with a percentage of 3.33 and a rating of 2, is solidarity, considered as mutual support and cooperation between individuals or groups in situations of difficulty and injustice. Due to empathy and joint action to achieve common goals and overcome adversity, it is valued for the achievement of more just and humane societies.

Conclusions

Interaction within the classroom allows us to understand the relationship between power and learning in the educational environment, characterised by the idea that students should have equal opportunities for learning and participation. As can be seen from the above results, the word equity dominates in terms of equal treatment [García, 2009].; [Secretaría de Educación Pública [SEP], 2020]

In general terms, it is considered that in order to achieve equal treatment, it is necessary to have equal access to educational materials, such as books, the internet, and the library, as well as additional support from the teacher, through fair and impartial treatment, characterised by respect and consideration regardless of origin, gender, abilities, etc. [Zuñe et. al. 2021]

Active participation is also necessary to encourage the entire classroom to participate in class activities, ensuring that no one is excluded or marginalised. Another important element is that assessments must be impartial and based on clear and consistent criteria for all students.

These ideas are evident in the terms that the assessment action must be impartial, as well as gender parity, and balance in the teacher's treatment of the student must not be absent, so that authority relationships are neutral and fraternal and tend to achieve equality among all actors in the classroom.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is authoritarianism, characterised by the existence of rigid discipline in the classroom, where teachers tend to impose strict rules that lead to severe punishments in order to maintain order in the classroom.

It was described by students as despotism, dictatorship or totalitarianism in decreasing order, which manifests itself in the classroom as a lack of flexibility or adaptation to the needs of individual students.

To a certain extent, there is one-way communication, characterised by the teacher giving instructions from the top down and the students obeying without question, with an emphasis on generating obedience and compliance with rules, which eliminate creativity and critical thinking.

Thus, for the educational process to take place in an effective learning environment, it is necessary to find a balance between authoritarianism and equality through democratic leadership, characterised by flexibility, where students have the opportunity to participate by having a say in certain decisions.

When leading the group, it is advisable to avoid severe punishments and use positive discipline strategies that encourage mutual respect and self-regulation. It is also advisable to adapt teaching to the needs of students and their learning styles in order to promote equality without sacrificing structure. Finally, the use of critical thinking to question constructively, in order to balance the authority of the teacher with the autonomy of the student, can be taken into consideration in this type of exercise.

Declarations

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. They have no competing financial interests or known personal relationships that could have influenced the article reported in this article.

Contribution of the authors.

Ortiz-y-Ojeda Pedro Tomás: Contributes to the development of the idea, its analysis and the writing of the article.

Ortiz-Sánchez Pedro Alfonso Guadalupe: Contributes to the questionnaire and the processing of information, drafting and writing of the article.

Sanchez-Iturbe Patricia Guadalupe: Contributes to the generation, drafting and application of the questionnaire, its analysis and the writing of the article.

Basave-Torres, Rosy Ilda: Contributed to the management of the submission process.

Availability of data and materials

The data obtained for this research are available in an electronic repository owned by the Didactics and Application of Basic Sciences academic body.

Funding

This research was funded by the researchers-authors themselves.

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

PNL	Natural Language Processing
	National Technological Institute of
TecNM	Mexico
UCM	Complutense University of Madrid
ZDP	Zone of proximal development

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Background

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Ortiz- y Ojeda, Pedro Tomás, Ortiz-Sánchez, Pedro Alfonso Guadalupe, Sánchez-Iturbe, Patricia Guadalupe and Basave-Torres, Rosy Ilda. [2025]. Between equality and authoritarianism: daily interaction in the development of knowledge construction in the classroom. Journal of Social Researches. 11[27]1-9: e11127109. <https://doi.org/10.35429/JSR.2025.11.27.1.1.9>

Article

Ames Ramello, P. [Ed.]. [2020]. *Las brechas invisibles. Desafíos para una equidad de género en la educación*. Instituto de Estudios Peruanos.

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