Traditions in Transition. Reflections on Teacher Authority in Late Modernity[1]

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Abstract

In the last decade of educational policy reform, Sweden has taken firm steps towards strengthening teacher's authority – for instance by implementing new tools for maintaining school discipline, and by initiating a whole new system of teacher certification. But what kind of authority are we thus strengthening? Sociologist Max Weber showed us that authority has many facets, and that it is a concept always in need of further differentiation. Making the issue even more complex, modern sociologists like Zygmunt Bauman and Manuel Castells tell us that the very foundations of authority are trembling in the tremors of postmodern thought and technology. The purpose of this article is to make use of sociologists like Weber, Bauman and Castells in order to shed light on Sweden's recent attempts at strengthening teacher authority. As a result, the article finds that the policies in question rely heavily on formal/legal authority, arguing for the future need to address other facets as well, if the demands of late modern society are to be met.

Introduction

Authority – a word of weight and profundity. In fact so profound and weighty, that it seems to strike a false chord against the light and quick melodies that build up our 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000). Is it a word of relevance today? In the context of Swedish educational policy, it has certainly been heard in a few verses for the last decade – sometimes with explicit lyrics, sometimes without. Following public and political debates on disciplinary issues in Swedish schools, a series of policy changes have for instance been launched in order to strengthen the authority of teachers, enabling them to make forceful interventions in disorderly environments (see Larsson, Pérez Prieto & Löfdahl, 2010). Anyone with experience of teaching knows that the trade indeed becomes impossible in a disorderly classroom, and from this perspective, the establishment of authority may be a welcome improvement of teacher's

workspace environment. But from the viewpoint of educational sociology, some additional questions need to be answered. These are mandated on the basis of society having changed quite a lot since teachers were able to root their sense of authority firmly in the disciplinary structures of early industrialism (Foucault, 1977; O'Neill, 1986). Now, we need to understand how the structure and possibility of authority have changed in accordance; as for instance, in the light of social changes such as globalization and individualization (Bauman, 2000, 2001) and the rise of worldwide communication networks (Castells, 2010; 2004; 2001). This paper will attempt to address this topic, using Max Webers typology of authority, Foucauldian notions of power, and the social theories of Bauman and Castells, aiming to discuss current attempts to strengthen teacher authority in Sweden.

What is authority?

According to classic sociologist Max Weber (1978), authority can be divided in three separate types – the *traditional*, the *legal/formal*, and the *charismatic*. Common to all three is that they facilitate the possibility of domination over others – not coercion, but domination that is based on a certain degree of consent. It is defined as the "probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by a given group of persons" (p. 212) – on the basic premise that obedience is, to some degree, in the personal interest of the one subjected. Peculiar to *traditional* authority is that it is grounded on a set of cultural beliefs that have been handed down through generations, and that lend a sense of legitimate power to anyone that occupies the role – such as the authority an elderly person might enjoy in relation to a younger. *Formal/legal* authority on the other hand, is based on a set of written laws, or rules, and the rational belief that the formal or juridical system is valid. It has no connection with the person in authority – his personal traits do not influence the authority he enjoys. It may use a system of rewards and punishments, that the dominated one subjects himself to in order to achieve some personal goal (Pace & Hemmings, 2006). The third type, *charismatic authority*, differs from the two others by being intimately connected to personal traits. It is grounded purely on the basis of some strength of character; on "personal devotion to the figure that possesses the qualities exalted by the followers" (Pellegrino, 2010, p. 64). It often evokes emotional engagement; and examples are for instance found in religious leadership (Weber, 1978).

In many senses, authority resembles power in the Foucauldian sense – as something that "is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free" (Foucault, 1983, p. 221). However Foucault would probably add that power has a much more general and diffuse character, and that it 'swings in both ways' in the sense of being responsible for the formation and regulation of the subject *in* authority as well (Foucault, 1977; 1980a; 1980b; Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983). Nevertheless, systems of formal/legal authority share many traits with disciplinary power. For instance, the operation on a basis of rational consent, on efficient administration, and on the possibility of sanctions to deter from deviation (O'Neill, 1986).

That being said, it should be noted that for Weber, the 'pure forms' of authority were analytical constructs that always exist in a mixed form when manifest in society. Interestingly, we find an example of this if we consider Emile Durkheim's (1956) ideal of teacher authority. Appearing to be a mix between traditional and charismatic authority, it is unfit for any of Weber's pure forms. It is a personal charisma, but emanating from an impersonal source – the teacher's unshakable belief in his work, his importance, and the highest morals to which his society has aspired and which he is trusted to impart to his students. Willpower was a very important ingredient for this authority – and this is very much a personal characteristic – but Durkheim was certain that it had nothing to do with the power to reward and punish. Such a power, he argued, "has moral value only if chastisement is recognized as just even by him who suffers it, which implies that the authority which punishes is already recognized as legitimate. And this is the question" (p. 87). So far, he is in agreement with Weber on formal/legal authority. Disbelief in the rationality of the system renders it meaningless, making it a highly volatile form of authority. Durkheim preferred to rely on the personal power to connect with the impersonal, but it "is not from the outside that the teacher can hold his authority, it is from himself" (2006, p. 87).

Networks and Flow - Teacher Authority in Late Modern Societies

While Weber's own analysis lacked an explicit relation to school and teacher authority, there have been several attempts to make this connection in recent research. For instance, Pace and Hemmings argue that teacher authority has undergone some significant changes in modern times. Traditionally, "society did

not question the traditional legitimacy of teachers" (2006, p. 10), but today, we can no longer count on this form of authority to hold water:

> A dramatic ideological shift occurred in the 1960s when the civil rights movement, women's liberation, protests against the Vietnam war, court cases supporting students' rights, and other calls to question authority facilitated the impact of liberal education reformers on schooling nationwide" (Pace, Hemmings, 2006, p.10).

This '60's spirit' of questioning authority has, as Foucault (1983) noted, been a driving force behind many of the anti-authoritarian struggles occurring subsequently – for instance the questioning of 'given' forms of authority such as men's domination over women; parent's authority over children; or political administrations' power over people's lifestyle. Since then, society has also passed through a phase of postmodern self-understanding, "marked by a view of the human world as irreducibly and irrevocably pluralistic, split into a multitude of sovereign units and sites of authority, with no horizontal or vertical order" (Bauman, 1992, p. 35). In many ways, this is a development that has been paralleled on the material plane. Manuel Castells (2010) for instance, show that they are ideals that pertain to advances in network technology as well. Considering the possibilities of authority in postindustrial culture, we need to acquaint ourselves a little with the basics of 'Network Society'.

Authority and Network Power

The Age of Information has, no doubt, brought changes and challenges to human life that extend well beyond the personal domain of on-line shopping, gaming, and e-mailing. While individual patterns of consumption, social life and cultural expression certainly have found new possibilities in the digital landscape, the rise of global, instant networked communication has paved the way for some groundbreaking changes on socioeconomic levels – such as increased flexibility and adaptability in terms of workforce organization, training and mobility (Bauman, 2001; Kamat; Mir & Mathew, 2006; Willis, 2006). According to some social theorists, there are good reasons to believe that the age of network technology brings changes that reach even deeper into the social fabric – affecting the mechanisms by which power is distributed and negotiated throughout society. For instance, in the way it offers extended possibilities for surveillance and monitoring of citizens (Hope, 2005; Ball, 2005); or, as Bauman

(2000) argues, in the way it enables power and its representatives to take a leap into anonymity; vanish into the ephemeral; and if worst comes to worst, move beyond the reach of democratic institutions.

But on the other hand, network society also brings *new* potentials for democratization. The Internet makes available, for the first time, a mode of communication that affords the one to reach the many in an instant, offering opportunities to contest power as well; to become more well-informed; to engage in democratic movement and take collective action (Castells; 2004; 2001; 2010). That such networked social movement has a potential to extend itself into concreteness and materiality seems, at any rate, to have been demonstrated in the Facebook-powered protests and upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt during early 2011 (see Preston, 2011).

Such profound changes do, of course, set the prospects of education in a new light as well. Staying unconcerned with the more vivid utopias and dystopias concerning e-learning – such as the prospect of schools becoming 'all virtual' and teaching becoming obsolete as students gain their knowledge on the web – it is possible to agree with Green (2006) that "information technology may well lead to a substantial decoupling of learning from institutional spaces" (p. 194). While no one could deny that learning still goes on within as well as without the formal education system, network communication undeniably takes society another step towards the dethronization of the teacher as *the* primary source of knowledge and information. The teacher's own sense, understanding and possibility of authority must, accordingly, change in due manner. He can no longer lean back on a bedrock of self-evident, traditional, teacher authority – today's youth are baptized in a culture where traditional social hierarchies and networks have been dismantled in favour of individualization (Bauman, 2000; 2001). Neither can he expect to command respect simply by virtue of being an official of state – today's youth are accustomed to critical thinking, student autonomy and empowerment (Elliott, 2009). This is the context in which Sweden makes an effort to strengthen teacher authority.

Teacher authority in current Swedish educational policy

In 2010, the Swedish Parliament passed a whole new School Act – a major revision of the educational/legal system (Department of Education, 2010). In this act, a chapter is devoted to guidelines for securing of an orderly

environment in school; which, for every school unit, should begin with the establishment of local rules of conduct; to be decided upon in mutual agreement and cooperation with the students (chapter 5, §5). In the next paragraph, we find regulations for the disciplinary actions teachers and principals can take, should these rules of conduct be neglected by a student. The sanctions available in case of non-compliance are mainly the following: 1) ordering the student out of the classroom; 2) detention; 3) replacement within the school unit or to another school unit; and 4) suspension. There are also regulations allowing teachers and principals the right to confiscate any objects that are deemed to be disturbing to a good learning environment (§6).

According to a Weberian typology of authority, it is rather clear that these efforts to strengthen teacher authority are aimed at the formal/legal basis. The rules of conduct are to be agreed upon by all students, forming a rational system to ensure a healthy working environment that every student, in principle, should benefit from complying to. In this context, it may still be surprising to learn that no procedures for the personal training of teachers' authority are mentioned. The basis of their new authority resides solely on a discursive level; formally in the local rules of conduct, and the law text of the sixth chapter of the School Act 2010:800. It should finally be noted, that in this Act, a system of teacher certification is introduced, so that every practitioner from July 2011 on (when the Act became legally valid) are to be formally authorized by the national Agency of Education, after successfully graduating and completing one year of introductory practice (Chapter 2, §13-16). This is, once again according to a Weberian approach, a clear indication that it is on the basis of a legal/formal system that teachers are to be given new authority. It is also a clear indication of the Swedish State taking an interest in the centralization of teacher competence validation. "For all the postmodern protestations to the contrary", Green tells us, "and despite the effects of globalization trends, governments across the world still exercise considerable control over their national education systems and still seek to use them to achieve national goals" (2006, p. 194). Sweden's recent advances in formal authority regulation make no exception.

Concluding discussion

Following the presumed erosion of society's traditional authority base, where can we turn for a sense of authority that is more appropriate to our times? Perhaps we can do without altogether? As theorists, we may allow ourselves to

be comforted with this notion. As newly-baked teachers entering our first classroom, we may feel somewhat less comforted. In the trade of teaching, some basis of authority is indispensable for gaining a sense of educational leadership (Pellegrino, 2010). Where is the solution? Educational policy in Sweden has clearly placed its bets on formal/legal authority. Granted, it fits well with late modern societies that want their citizens to be self-managed and self-disciplined, their power relations to be fluid and their power concentrations to be elusive. Charismatic authority on the other hand, depends on personal qualities that the individual possesses, or can learn to cultivate; a possible nuisance being that it also invokes a power relation beyond the impersonal; and concentrates power in the hands of one person. It has other drawbacks as well. As is shown by Pellegrino (2010), rookie teachers often resort to it by 'playing it cool' with the kids, or going street-smart, which can give a momentary sense of authority – but this seldom gets them through the tough, boring and dreary days at work. Charisma cannot shine for a whole semester.

Emile Durkheim, as we have seen, had another solution. For him, the answer was a sense of moral authority that depended on will-power and the unshakable belief in the important task of teaching – and in the end, this was what gave the teacher his individual charisma as well. It is apparent, however, that this kind of authority plays quite a different theme than the one laid down in current policy affairs, and the beat is somewhat less likely to agree with a metronome. Formal/legal authority will remain in dominance, but time will have to show if it is the last, trembling chord of the coda before the final crescendo, or if it plays the key note for a whole new concept album.

Notes

1. This article is a revised version of an exam paper, written for the Ph.D course Education and Society ("Utbildning och Samhälle"), Karlstad University, 2011.

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