

Reading 11

Authority, responsibility, and democracy in creating climates for learning

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Possibly the most significant professional choice that teachers make (consciously or unconsciously) relates to how they see their responsibilities as **people in authority**. In this note, originally written for a University of the Western Cape study guide, Professor Morrow tries to help teachers understand this authority role.

Notes

In order to do so, he introduces a number of significant distinctions. Some of the most important of these distinctions are those between **power** and **authority** (that is, legitimate, democratic authority); between **political** authority and **educational** authority; and between **control** and **discipline**.

Part 1: Power and authority

Reading

There is a very important difference between:

- a) being able to **force** someone else to do something you want them to do; and
- b) having the **right** to tell others what to do.

A failure to recognize this difference seriously undermines our conception of authority, including the authority of teachers.

Let's think about this difference.

Gangleaders can **force** the members of their gang to act in certain ways and do certain things that, probably, the members would not do if

the gangleaders did not force them to do them.

If we ask: 'How do gangleaders force the members to do these things?' then we can see that there are many techniques they might use, some of which involve brute physical violence but some of which might involve more subtle 'persuasion' ('an offer they can't refuse') such as threats. They might beat up those members who do not conform, or threaten to damage them, or their friends and families, or destroy some of their possessions or their reputation. Or they might use even more subtle methods, such as offering them a bigger cut of the spoils if they conform, or working on the self-images of the members ('If you stick to the rules of this gang, you will not only get excitement and profit, but you will also be able to walk tall in the community').

Similarly, gangs themselves can terrorize whole communities using similar methods. They can, for instance, offer a shopkeeper protection of his property and person against the activities of their own or other gangs or petty criminals, for a fee; or they can force someone to become the 'front' for the transfer of stolen property by threatening violence to his or her family if she refuses to; or they can hijack a car or an aeroplane, and take 'hostages'; or they can place a bomb in a public place and threaten to detonate it unless their 'demands' are met, and so on.

These are examples of (a) people being **forced** to do something they would not otherwise do by (b) those who have no **right** to force or tell others what to do.

Before you continue, think about this:

- Do you think we should say that if gangs and terrorist groups can in fact get others to listen to their demands and instructions, then that gives them the right to have their demands and instructions met?
- What gives anyone the right to tell others what to do?

Let's begin to think about such rights in terms of the examples of traffic officers and referees.

A traffic officer on point duty at an intersection 'directs' the traffic. She tells some people to stop and wait, tells others they can go now, or turn the corner, etc. But she has a **right** to control their actions in this way. What gave her this right? Well, there was a whole procedure by means of which she was appointed as a traffic officer. Perhaps she had to study and pass examinations, etc. And her appointment as a traffic officer conferred certain rights on her, the right, for instance, to be obeyed if she is directing the traffic at an intersection.

Think, now, about the following question:

- Does the traffic officer have the democratic right to tell road users what to do at an intersection? (Note that she was not elected as a traffic

officer, and the road users at the intersection were not consulted about her appointment.)

In a soccer match the referee has two sorts of rights: some in relation to the rules of soccer, and some in relation to the general conditions for it to be possible to play soccer. The former are the **constitutive rules** of the practice of playing soccer; the latter are **regulative rules**.

As examples of the referee's rights in relation to the **constitutive** rules of soccer, we might think of his right to say whether or not it was a handball, whether or not a goal has been scored, whether a penalty or a free kick should be awarded, etc. As examples of the referee's rights in respect to **regulative** rules (rules concerned with maintaining the conditions for the game to proceed in an orderly way), we might think of his right to send off a player who punches another player.

Although the referee's decision is final (this is his **right**) he might consult with the linespersons or other impartial sources of information in problematic cases (think of the use of TV as a 'third umpire' in the case of cricket), but he does **not** consult with the players, who after all, are those most affected by the decisions he makes (if they are professional soccer players, their very livelihood might be affected by his decisions!), nor does he consult with the spectators.

Before you continue, think carefully about the following:

- Do the rules of soccer prevent soccer players from being creative?
- Why does the soccer referee not consult with the players or the crowd when he has a tricky decision to make?
- Are the rights of the soccer referee **undemocratic**?

Of course we know why the referee doesn't consult with the players or the crowd. A soccer match is a rule-governed contest of a particular kind, and in order for the contest to be fair we want the referee to be neutral or impartial between the competing teams; a referee accused of bias is being accused of failing in his responsibility to maintain the conditions for a fair contest, and, thus 'spoiling' the match.

The contestants, the players, have a **sectional interest** in the outcome of the match, and the crowd is likely to as well, thus their 'advice' in the case of a tricky decision is highly likely to be biased by this interest. When the referee does **not** consult the players or the crowd it is not because he is serving his **own** interests; he is serving the interests of the game, and this is in the **common interests** of all the contestants and the crowd, and indeed of all those who are interested in soccer, whether as players or spectators.

constitutive rules: in this context, the rules that establish the game of soccer (i.e. the rules that make soccer different from, say, rugby)

regulative rules: the rules that enable those in charge to maintain order

The rules create the game: with different rules it would not be soccer, and some of those rules create the conditions for a fair contest between teams.

sectional interest: concern for the good of one's own section or group, rather than that of everybody

common interest: concerns shared by all

To whom is the referee accountable for the decisions that he makes?

We might say that the referee is accountable, in the end, to all those who are interested in soccer ('all the stakeholders!'), but, as the examples above indicate, we need to add that this does not imply that he should *consult* with all those interested when he makes a decision. (Can we even imagine what this would involve, and whether any match could ever be concluded if we thought this was the way the referee had to proceed in order to be accountable?) In the case of soccer referees, we accept a different procedure to ensure his accountability. He is responsible to the referees' association and, perhaps the soccer federation, which awards referees' certificates, and appointed him as the referee for the match. If he is found to have fallen down in his responsibilities as a referee, it is such bodies that can withdraw his referee's ticket.

Look back to (a) and (b) at the start of this article (page 71). Gangs and terrorist groups are examples of (a) – they operate by force or compulsion. Traffic officers and referees illustrate an authority associated with (b), i.e. citizens give them the right to tell us what to do.

Now think carefully about the following very important question:

- **Is the relationship between teachers and learners best understood on the model of (a) force, or (b) right?**

In English we distinguish between force and right in terms of a contrast between power and authority. *Power* is a kind of relationship between people or things in which *rights are not involved*; *authority* is a kind of relationship between people in which *rights are necessarily* involved. And a confusion between these two has very serious consequences, especially in the case of teaching. Teacher–learner relationships are relationships of authority.

Relationships of power can exist between people and aspects of the natural world, or animals, or machines, or other people; but relationships of authority can exist only between people. If I control the growth of a plant (by, for example, cutting off some of its branches), or if I chuck the cat out of the door, or if I control the direction in which my car is going, or if I bump someone out of my way I am exercising power over them. These relationships have nothing to do with *rights*; I do not have a *right* to do such things – I simply do them if I am strong or cunning or deceptive or clever enough. But I cannot have a relationship of authority with a plant or a machine, or an animal, and this is because such relationships are not constructed in terms of rights.

Human communities are characterized by a kind of orderliness that is established and maintained not by raw power, but by structures of *authority* in which some people have the *right* and the *responsibility* to take decisions that affect others. This might be described as a *moral*

order, an order that does not serve some or other merely personal or sectional interest but is in the interest of *all* those who aspire to live *human* lives.

If a sense of authority is lost then the moral order disintegrates, the quality of our lives degenerates, democracy is not possible, and what we are left with is merely a contest in which the powerful will serve their own sectional interests, in more or less subtle ways, and suppress or eliminate their rivals. Democracy is a way of organizing our collective lives so that moral order is maintained, and the idea of *legitimate authority* is central to the idea of democracy.

Is consultation with those who will be affected the only basis for legitimate authority?

The examples of the authority of traffic officers and referees have already provided us with grounds for doubting this as a general principle for how to characterize legitimate authority. In spite of the fact that it is not based on consultation, at least not in any direct way, the authority of these people is nevertheless legitimate. This is because it is accepted by all as being in everyone's interests, not just the interests a few, and because it plays a key role in maintaining the orderliness of some collective activities that are important to our lives.

Before you continue, think about this:

- Is a society that acknowledges legitimate forms of authority that are not justified in terms of direct consultation with those affected, by definition **not** a democratic society?

If we ask whether the authority of traffic officers and referees is *democratic* (look again at the questions on pages 72 and 73) then we might have some difficulty in knowing what to say. From the point of view of direct consultation it might appear not to be democratic, but if we understand the ways in which such authority *serves common interests* then we would probably say that it is legitimate democratic authority.

The way out of these puzzles is to recognize that there are *different kinds of authority* that characterize a democratic society. Some kinds of authority (e.g. *political* authority) depend for their legitimacy on consultation with those affected, but some kinds are justified in other ways – and traffic officers, referees, and teachers provide us with examples of the latter.

One way of understanding the breakdown of the culture of learning in South Africa is to say that it is fuelled not only by a confusion between power and authority but also by a confusion between political and educational authority. Part of our legacy of political protest is that, along

with other forms of authority, the authority of teachers was conceived of as a kind of *political authority* and, as such, in need of being rejected in the service of 'creating the new democratic society'.

Part 2: Political and educational authority

Let's think about this matter carefully, because it takes us to the heart of what we might mean by education and the authority of teachers in a democratic society, and to at least one way of understanding why there has been a breakdown in a culture of learning, and how we might overcome it.

The principle of equality is a basic principle of democratic *political* authority. Each of the citizens of a democratic society has an *equal right* to have their voice heard, to have their interests taken into account in political decisions taken. And it is this principle that underlies the idea that the only kind of legitimate authority in a democracy is that kind justified in terms of consultation with those who are affected.

Think, now, about the relationship between teachers and learners:

- **Could teachers and learners be *equals* in the teaching situation?**

There are important reasons why we must say 'no' in answer to this question. Unless a teacher knows or understands something that the learners do not (yet) know or understand, we would have no reason to identify them as the 'teacher' in such a situation.

If I want to learn how to do mathematics or learn to speak a different language or how to become a competent nurse, or even how to drive a motor car or how to play better soccer, and I need the assistance of a teacher (of course, much of what I learn I learn without the help of a teacher), I need a teacher who knows and understands mathematics, the language I want to learn [...] etc, better than I do at this time. I need to acknowledge the *inequality*, in respect to what I want to learn, between me and my teacher. I need to accept the *authority* of my teacher, at least in this respect. If I do not, then I am most unlikely to learn it from them.

Thus, *in respect to what is being taught and learnt*, there *must* be *inequality* between teachers and learners. This is not merely a decision we make; it is an aspect of the *concept* of teaching. The *necessary* inequality between teachers and learners, in respect to what is being taught and learnt, explains why there is a link between the concept of authority and the concept of teaching – we cannot understand teaching if we break this link. And this provides us with very good reason to make a clear *distinction* between political and educational authority, and, correspondingly, the ways in which these two kinds of authority need to be justified.

Does this inequality imply that educational authority **cannot be democratic**?

To use the model of legitimate political authority as the way of trying to understand **legitimate educational authority** is not only inappropriate, it also serves to distort, and undermine, the concept of educational authority, in practice as well as in theory. It is only on a one-dimensional view of democracy that we should reject educational authority in the name of democracy, on the ground that it is based on inequality.

In the light of the necessary inequality between teachers and learners (in respect to what is being taught and learnt) let us now think about educational authority and consultation.

If I am a mature learner, I might be able to make a reasonably reliable judgement, in the case of some of the things I want to learn, about who will be a good teacher. But in many cases, even if I am a mature learner, I will not be able to tell in advance which teachers might be good teachers.

Before you continue:

- Think of your own experience as a learner. Can you suggest any reasons why learners may be in a poor position to judge in **advance** which teachers might best help them to learn what they want to?

One reason might be that it is often only **after the event** that we can say who were the best teachers we had, but a very important reason is that in the case of many kinds of things I might want to learn (such as, for example, an academic discipline), what I want to learn is not transparent. Before I have at least begun to learn it, I cannot understand it. I need a **teacher** precisely because I do not (yet) have an adequate understanding of what I want to learn.

Although this is, in general, true, it is especially clear and obvious in the case of less mature learners. Before a person can read, or do arithmetic, at least to some extent, they cannot make a sound judgement about which teachers of reading and arithmetic will most effectively enable them to learn how to participate in these practices; their understanding of these practices is, at best, external. Although they might have 'seen' other people reading or doing arithmetic, there is an important sense in which they can have no idea what such people are doing.

Which teachers might be good at teaching, say, reading or arithmetic, depends, fundamentally, on how well they themselves understand the practices in question, and no one can make a judgement in this regard unless they themselves also understand these practices.

“Political authority is based on the principle of equality: educational authority is based on the idea that teachers and learners cannot be equals in respect to what is being taught or learnt.”

Before you continue:

- Think of the practice that we call gymnastics. If we were looking for teachers of gymnastics as judges for a gymnastic competition, or examiners for the award of gymnastics certificates, what should one of our fundamental criteria be?

Quite clearly we need, at least, a person who themselves has a good understanding of gymnastics, and can *discriminate* on the relevant grounds between excellent, mediocre, and poor performances in the practice of gymnastics. We need someone who has a sensitive and informed understanding of this practice, and can reliably make good judgements about the quality of gymnastic performances.

We can now imagine someone objecting to this line of reasoning as follows:

The view taken here is deeply conservative. It preserves the status quo by reinforcing and consolidating the dominating structures that we need to dismantle if we really want to transform our society. What we should do is to take a leaf out of our recent history and replace the system in which teachers are appointed by some kind of bureaucratic procedure with one in which teachers are elected by the students, those who will be most directly affected by what those teachers will do. This is the only way to legitimize the authority of teachers.

Conclusion

Teachers, including schoolteachers, are appointed rather than elected, and we can now see that there are good *democratic* reasons for this practice. Teachers are appointed on grounds accepted by a democratic community – a community dedicated to maintaining moral order in society. Teachers are not directly appointed *by* the democratic community, but *on behalf of* them and *in terms of relevant criteria*. At the centre of these criteria must be some kind of demonstrated competence in the practice that the teacher will have the responsibility to teach.

This is why, in a democracy, we expect teachers to be ‘qualified’; they need to have demonstrated that they do indeed have a proper understanding of what they are being appointed to teach and how to teach it. If I am ignorant about, or have only a shallow understanding of, word-processing, health care or physical science, I will be a poor teacher of word-processing, health care or physical science, no matter how charming or entertaining I might be, and no matter how popular I might be with my learners, or how good my intentions are.

What we have discovered so far is that:

- There is an important distinction between power and authority, and between political authority and educational authority;
- Not all forms of legitimate authority in a democracy are based on direct consultation;
- In respect to what is being taught and learnt, teachers and learners are necessarily unequal;
- There is a necessary link between authority and the practice of teaching; and
- There is a link between a rejection of educational authority and a breakdown of the culture of learning, partly because many learners confuse educational authority with political authority, and partly because many teachers confuse it with force.

Taking our cue from this last point, let us now turn our attention to the particular professional responsibilities – the authority – of teachers in our historical context.

In our context there are two issues of particular importance in relation to the authority of teachers. One has to do with the dual responsibilities of teachers, not only to teach, but also to establish and *maintain the conditions for systematic teaching and learning to be possible*; the other has to do with the effective *exercise of authority*. Let's begin to think about these two kinds of issues.

Part 3: Authority and the organization of learning-space

When we talk about a 'breakdown in the cultures of teaching and learning', what we mean, in part, is that in our institutions and classrooms, there is a lack of organization and orderliness. Routines are not well established; many learners and teachers are frequently absent or late or leave early; and, from both teachers and learners, there is often little respect for teaching time. In a disorganized context such as this, educational purposes cannot be effectively and systematically pursued.

Think about the principle of equality. Teachers and learners are unequal in respect to:

- What is to be taught and learnt. We are here in the realm of constitutive rules, and discipline.
- Their knowledge of the conditions that are *conducive* for systematic teaching and learning to be possible. We are here in the realm of regulative rules, and control.

conducive: Helping something to happen or making it likely

Regulative rules regulate behaviour that takes place independently of constitutive rules (think of the rules that prohibit soccer players from punching other players, at least on the field of play); and control needs to be exercised by the referee to ensure that the *conditions for disciplined engagement* in the practice of playing soccer are maintained.

Morrow does not explain in this reading the distinction that he draws between *discipline* and *control*. It may be summarized as follows:

Both discipline and control are forms of order, but they are of a very different kind. The order in a *disciplined* activity is an essential part of the activity itself – without learning this order, you would not be able to learn the activity at all. For instance, order in mathematics requires that operations are performed logically, consistently, and accurately, according to certain rules (2 follows 1; 3 follows 2; a circle equals 360 degrees). These are the features that make mathematics a disciplined study – a ‘discipline’ to which one has to subject oneself in order to make any use of it at all. The internal rules and particular order of mathematics are what make the study mathematics and not something else – they are thus ‘constitutive rules’, the rules that *constitute* a discipline (see the Learning Guide). Another example of such rules would be that in soccer, the ball must pass into the net for a goal to be scored.

By contrast, the order in a *controlled* activity is imposed for reasons that are *not* an essential *part* of the activity. Control is imposed, physically or psychologically, so that the activity can be carried out in an orderly, safe, and uninterrupted manner. For instance, traffic officers control the flow of pedestrians and vehicles for the safety and easy movement of all concerned – to prevent traffic chaos. But traffic control is not an *essential* part of moving from one place to another (one could walk, or drive an off-road vehicle from one place in the veld to another without any traffic control being involved; and in some towns of the world, traffic control is almost absent, but people still manage to get from A to B safely most of the time). The rules used in controlling human activities to prevent disorder are thus ‘regulative rules’ (for instance, soccer players are not allowed to punch one another on the field).

A teacher, especially in our situation, has not only the *right* but also the *responsibility* to *control* the practical conditions needed for systematic teaching and learning to be possible. And to maintain the consistency (fairness) of such control, something like regulative rules are probably needed. Think of a few rules that might be appropriate in your classroom.

Such rules need to be justified in terms of the conditions needed for teaching and learning to proceed effectively; they have to do with maintaining the orderliness of the surroundings of teaching and learning; with peace and safety, and with habits and routines that have not only social but also *psychological* functions. Before you continue, I'd like you to

think of your own experiences. Do you think that it is true that a clearly-structured environment has positive psychological effects?

In our context, if schools could become havens of peace and orderliness, places where learners from possibly violent and disorganized circumstances of living can at least feel safe, this itself would be a contribution to the future of our democratic society, to a consolidation of a moral order based on legitimate authority rather than violence and raw power.

And teachers are key agents in this task – they have a responsibility that, strictly, falls outside of their formal responsibility as teachers of health care, mathematics, netball, history, or first aid. They have the right, *and the democratic responsibility*, to do what is required to establish and maintain the conditions for systematic teaching and learning to be possible.

This responsibility might be very light in an already well-ordered institution, and it might dwindle almost to zero if the learners in question are mature, and serious in their intentions to learn. But in many of our formal institutions of learning such conditions still need to be established, and then maintained, as many of the learners in those institutions do not understand the need for such conditions. And those learners who do already appreciate this need should be protected from those who either don't care about learning, or who have the mistaken idea that they are advancing the cause of freedom and democracy by disrupting or undermining rules and the orderliness of institutions. We need teachers who care about learning and who show that they care by insisting on the conditions for it to be possible.

Part 4: Effective authority

Teachers have the right (and responsibility) to control the conditions for teaching and learning, but in many cases this is far from easy. And this brings us to the final issue for this article. This is an issue that prospective teachers need to think about well, and with a practical purpose. Here are four guidelines for your thinking:

- 1 At the beginning of this article a difference is drawn between (a) being able to force someone to do something and (b) having a right to tell others what to do. In some cases (such as with traffic officers, referees, and teachers) the right to tell others what to do goes along with the responsibility to make sure that they do as they are told, and this responsibility is backed up by sanctions that force the relevant people to conform.

What forces road-users to obey the legitimate instructions of the traffic officer on point duty at an intersection? What forces a soccer player to obey the referee?

The answers to these questions are fairly obvious; the road-user who disobeys might be charged and taken to court, etc; the soccer player might be 'shown a yellow or a red card' or banned from playing for some time, etc. These are *sanctions* that underwrite the authority of these people.

sanctions: a threatened penalty that makes people obey laws, rules, etc.

If we ask an equivalent question in the case of teachers there is nothing like as clear an answer; but experienced teachers have developed effective methods of control. In some schools there are school-wide sanctions that all the teachers use – such as having to do some unpleasant task (e.g. picking up the rubbish in the playground), but in many cases teachers feel quite exposed and helpless; they have to depend on some measure of trust and goodwill from at least most of the students, and hope that something like peer pressure will play its part.

But we should avoid too pessimistic a conclusion here because:

- 2 Most teachers carry out their professional duties in institutions that collectively carry educational authority; teachers work in co-operation with other teachers who mutually support each others' attempts to establish, and maintain, the orderly conditions for teaching and learning to proceed on a systematic basis.

In addition to this, schools serve communities that have expectations about what they will deliver, and such expectations can themselves underwrite the authority of teachers.

- 3 There is also the important issue of the way in which authority is exercised. The muddled and tentative traffic officer, or the inconsistent and hesitant referee, are unlikely to be able to exercise their legitimate authority effectively. Similarly, once teachers understand their legitimate authority, and the democratic responsibilities which that involves, they need to cultivate a way of acting with authority.

What are some of the marks of a person 'acting with authority'? This is a question that, as a prospective teacher, you need to think about (think of how the example of stage actors provides some clues.) For different people there might be differences, but in general terms we can say that someone 'acting with authority' is someone who means what they say (a tone of voice – neither shrill nor hesitant), is clear and definite (is not seeking advice), and acts with the kind of consistency and impartiality that shows that they are not acting in their own interests. Someone acting with authority is not being

'rigid' or 'inflexible'; what they are doing is fulfilling their responsibility to serve the shared interests of all involved. When we look back, we probably appreciate the 'strict' teachers we had; those teachers who were 'harsh' or 'cruel' are a different matter.

- 4 This brings us, finally, to the topic of authoritarianism and the abuse of authority. Given our history we are inclined to be opposed to authority because we are familiar with the abuse of authority. This raises a whole range of issues that prospective teachers need to reflect on carefully. Begin this process by answering the following two questions:
- Does the following claim provide a good account of what we mean by the abuse of authority? (The abuse of authority refers to a situation in which someone placed in a position of authority acts not in the common interest but in her own interest. This might include her interest in dominating others or giving rein to her sadistic impulses.)
 - Does the possibility that teachers sometimes do, and have, abused their authority give us good reason to reject or deny the authority of teachers?