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Empowering Teachers: An answer in search of the question¹

Abstract

More and more thought and effort are given today to the question of empowering teachers. The object of this article is to examine the extent to which empowering would, in fact, solve a fundamental problem now facing the teaching profession. In order to determine the adequacy of empowerment, we must consider three questions: 1. What is the nature and extent of powerlessness in teaching? 2. What kind of power do teachers need? 3. Which conditions does this kind of power presuppose? Briefly stated, the question is: could empowering, as an answer, elude the fundamental issue, the cultural loss of a sense of moral authority?

Résumé

Depuis quelques années, les milieux d'enseignement font grand cas d'un mouvement qui entend donner aux enseignants le pouvoir décisionnel: on parle de teacher empowerment. Dans le but d'établir le bien-fondé de cette solution, nous posons les questions suivantes: 1. Quelle est la nature et l'étendue de l'impuissance professionnelle dans l'enseignement? 2. De quelle sorte de pouvoir les enseignants ont-ils besoin? 3. Quelles conditions cette sorte de pouvoir présuppose-t-elle? En somme, la question est la suivante: la solution de l'empowerment, éluderait-elle la question décisive, soit la perte du sens de l'autorité morale.

A glance at the history of education shows that it holds an ambiguous position on the social scale. On the one hand, because of its connection to the culture of learning, it is held in esteem; on the other hand, since it is a form of caring for the young, it offers great similarities to domestic work. But ambivalence is uncomfortable. The Greeks solved the problem by holding the *didaskalos* in high esteem and charging their slaves with the

tasks of the *paidagogos*; the French had high regard for the contribution of *le gouverneur* but much less for the work of *la gouvernante*. Today, the same society that used to extol schoolteaching as a noble vocation is demanding more accountability from this large group of public sector employees. The very amount of recent literature on teacher empowerment shows that schoolteaching needs and wants to gain or reclaim some status on the social scale of occupations.

Surely, no one would argue against giving socio-political power to any occupational group. But empowering, in and of itself, takes us only part of the way. It is an answer begging such questions as: What is it that justifies the critical element of indeterminacy in any professional's intervention? In other words, on what grounds can professionals claim self-responsibility, discretionary judgement and freedom from external monitoring and supervision? This question can best be answered by considering the following related issues. First, the fact of powerlessness in school teaching: the sociological concept of mass professions and documented experience of teaching show that this is a profession in need of power. Establishing this fact imposes the second question: What kind of power do teachers need? History shows two kinds: *potestas* and *auctoritas*; teaching requires this last kind of power. But what are the conditions of possibility of that power? Examination of this question shows that *auctoritas* is based on two grounds: the epistemological and the moral.

A powerless profession

In ancient Greece, schoolteaching was the occupation of any one who found himself with no other choice: political exiles, wandering refugees, dethroned tyrants, disinherited aristocracy. A common joke about someone who had not been heard of for some time was to say: "He is either dead or teaching school somewhere" (Marrou, 1948, p. 223). In Victorian England, schoolteaching was the lot of the governess. Male teachers were also in charge of ringing bells, digging graves and the like; the minister as well might be willing to keep school on the side. In Kant's Germany, the minister transferred that duty to his assistant. Most of the time, however, the school master was neither pastor nor assistant, but a goodwill worker. When no such worker was available, anyone who knew anything, be they bankrupt merchants, disqualified students, or war invalids (Kant, 1966, p. 14) could assume the task of teaching school. Those were the facts behind J. B. Shaw's caustic ". . . those who can't, teach."

It is therefore understandable that schoolteaching, along with other service occupations, has sought ways to emerge from its lowly place on the scale of social occupations. In America, it has claimed the status of profession, with all the sociopolitical, personal, and economic advantages at-

tached to being a doctor, a lawyer, or a professor (Freidson, 1983, pp. 23-26). Today, schoolteaching has become what Shaw names a mass profession, along with clerical work, social work and ancillary work in health services. Mass professions are occupations staffed mainly by employees of the public sector (1987, pp. 775-786). These are managed professions where management is made ever more accountable. In mass professions, the employer requires a "package" of knowledge, skills, and personal qualities. This set of personal and professional characteristics is inculcated through job socialization and tested during selection. Any schoolteacher knows how much schools are bureaucratized and subject to external monitoring and control through detailed guidelines, supervision of syllabus coverage, visible preparation, willingness to participate in extra curricular activities, and record keeping.

In addition to labour control in the form of accountability, workers in the mass professions are constantly vulnerable to deskilling due to technological innovation. In teaching, deskilling is done not only by constantly changing methods and programs, but also by the addition of what Shaw names "pastoral responsibilities" (1987, p. 780) to the teaching load. Four decades ago, W. H. Clarke could foresee the advent of what he called "the teacher's tortured timetable" (Hope, 1950, p. 907). Recent research concurs with him (Maeroff, 1988; Giroux, 1991). What Clarke rightly anticipated is the impact of replacing the notion of teaching by that of "educating the whole child in all aspects of growth." It is, in effect, widely recognized today, that the child or student-centered ideology rates high on "nurturant effects" at the expense of "instructional effects" (Joyce & Weil, 1980, pp. 45, 50, 73, 92, 128).

Teaching means to make known or to assist in the acquisition of knowledge; it requires depth and breadth of knowledge and specialized know-how. Not everyone is a teacher. Educating, especially in the sense of the "child-centered approach" comes from *educare*² which means to nourish (as in breastfeeding), to take care of (as in tending to), and to raise (as in raising livestock). Educating can easily be understood as caring for and raising the young; parents, nannies, daycare workers, doctors, ministers, and police officers all do it in their own way. When the notion of teaching is replaced by that of educating, without mention of teachers' specific way of educating, the work-world passes from the culture of knowledge to something much more akin to the domestic environment. The emergence of the notion of educating then coincides with the feminization of the profession (Apple, 1985; Strober & Tyak, 1980) and with the fact that schoolteaching has become less and less attractive to those who wish to exercise greater independence and professional discretion in their careers (Sedlak & Schossman, 1987, p. 114). In 1992, the International Labour Organization acknowledged the "slow but unmistakable decline in teachers'

professional status" (p. 4), and this at the very time when UNESCO, UNDP, UNICEF, and the World Bank place educational concerns higher on their agenda. The international community considers that educational reform will not be accomplished without improvement of the status of teaching - a status that would attract and retain the best³. There is no denying that one of the main problems with the teaching profession is its powerlessness. Why, then, would empowering be an answer begging a question? The notion of power, once clarified, will give the answer.

What kind of power?

If, as Maeroff recognizes in the subtitle of his book, the issue facing the teaching profession is that of "overcoming the crisis of confidence", then giving or claiming power will not do. Anyone today knows that peer group power, expert power, charismatic power, can be and are easily misused. A crisis of confidence is, by definition, a moral crisis; what teachers need to reclaim, then, is a sense of moral credibility, reliability, ascendancy or, to put it in one word, moral authority. It is this sense of trustworthiness that needs restoration - i.e., a bringing back to its original state - if we are to overcome the present crisis of confidence. But power or empowering will not, in and of itself, give moral authority. This is why it is important to clarify these terms.

As Arendt (1987) explains, the Romans knew the difference between *potestas* and *auctoritas*. *Potestas* was in the hands of the representatives of the people. Diverse powers, expressed through laws, contracts, expertise, and arbitration were, in fact, strategic; they provided the means for the material organization of civilised living. *Auctoritas* was a reference transcending power and those in power. Its function was not that of devising and implementing means, but of presiding over the deliberations about ends worth choosing. In other words, *potestas* or diverse sociopolitical powers, was guided by *auctoritas*, a vision of ends worth being sought.

Roman *auctoritas* was one element of a trinity, along with tradition and religion. Tradition tied authority to the past, providing what could be seen as Ariane's thread through the maze of historical change; religion tied authority to transcendent realities which gave meaning and direction to everyday living. Authority was therefore always derived from, and attached to, something that was not itself; it was lost when it lost its ties with historical facts, moral values, symbols, and meanings that stood before, beyond and above itself. When authority was self-serving, it was, in the true sense of the word "perverted", i.e., turned against itself. Because it was, so to speak, a mediator between (past) foundations, (present) realizations, and (future) prospects, *auctoritas* was placed in elders, the senatorial *patres*, successors of the founding fathers. The very *raison d'être* of *auctoritas* was

to *augere*, “augment” or build upon the foundations, by placing the strategic decisions of those in power within the context of historical continuity and transcendent values. Choices of means were, in this way, “augmented” by their relation to chosen ends.

No one would argue for the return of Roman or any other form of imperialism. Nonetheless, certain elements of the concept of *auctoritas* could be retrieved and retained. The first most important fact to restore about authority is that it results from a favorable assessment of the moral character of a person by those very persons whose lives are touched by his or her work. Moral authority is an achievement - not an endowment, not a right, and not an *ex officio* prerogative. Persons achieve authority through dedication to work that is recognized by a community as important to that community.

A second structural dimension of authority may be found in its root concept: *auctor*, author. “Author-ity” is authorship, writes Arendt (1987, pp. 188-189). Teachers and adults need to acknowledge the fact that they are the authors, or at least the co-authors, of the world as it is. They need to stand before the young for those ideals they have espoused as artisans of civilizations. Responsible authorship towards both the world and those they have brought into it would inspire adults to preserve the world against abuse from inexperienced newcomers as well as the inexperienced from a world that could cause them harm. This kind of responsible “author-ity” is an important source of confidence and reliance - something not only the young need.

A final structural element of authority consists in the fact that it is temporary; its proper place lies, to borrow further from Arendt, “between past and future” (1987). One could say that authority stands at the crossroads; it is neither chained to nostalgic images, nor carried away by the lures of utopia. This crossroads is not a no-man’s land, but a bridge marking the borders and the bonds between reality and potentiality. Persons with authority stand between foundations, realizations and projects. They are not the builders, nor even the designers of the world to come, because designing and building belong to those who will be the authors of that world. In a similar way, teachers and all educators stand between yesterday and tomorrow. For them, exercising authority consists in conveying the best realizations of the past in their present form to those who will conserve, transform and, in their turn, “author” them in ways quite unforeseeable.

Would this authority overcome the crisis of confidence? The best answer is that of the young themselves. A recent study reports teenagers’ and young adults’ own expressions of their judgements, needs, aspirations, disappointments, and distress (Grand’Maison, 1992; 1992b). Transcripts of

interviews show them quite at loss in a monogenerational society. They say they have missed intellectual, emotional and moral guidance (Grand'Maison, 1992b, pp. 145, 260), continuity (Grand'Maison, 1992b, p. 143), and models of maturity (Grand'Maison, 1992b, p. 260). Reading of the three first volumes of the report (two more are forthcoming) causes one to wonder whether the young generation of drop-outs has not simply walked in the footsteps of many adults around them (Grand'Maison, 1993). But a very large number of parents and teachers would rightly argue that they have done their best to give their children and teenagers what they never had. Could it be that we have omitted to give them what we did have: an anchor in the present, roots in the past, a horizon before us, and points of reference all along the way? As anyone who has had one great teacher or two will acknowledge, authority is part of a system of reliance and trust that personalizes and intensifies relationships between persons and builds community. If this is the kind of power teachers need, how can they achieve it?

Which conditions of possibility?

Professional *auctoritas* has two dimensions: a vertical or epistemological dimension, its ties with knowledge, and a lateral or moral dimension, the trust relationship it builds with those it serves. It could therefore be argued that in order to gain professional authority, teachers will first have to reconsider their attitude toward the special kind of knowledge it takes to assist someone in acquiring knowledge. They will also have to reassess their position towards the two components of moral authority, namely tradition and religion.

The first or vertical dimension of professional authority is knowledge. Teachers need to be aware of the special kind of knowledge that teaching requires, i.e., practical knowledge, that of the practitioner. While it is usually clear that this is not the researcher's theoretical knowledge, it is not always understood that it also differs from the technician's highly specialized skills. Surely, a practitioner's knowledge is geared to concrete, immediate action, but that action, unlike that of the technician, is not dictated by a *technè*, a know-how or skill to be applied in problem-solving situations that are essentially the same. Because teaching or, for that matter, treating patients or arguing a case, require some technical know-how and even "tricks of the trade", teachers are strongly inclined to conceive of method as technique. As Shaw (1987) observes, this attitude prevails in mass professions. Workers tend to ignore the wider issues; this is exactly why they are vulnerable to deskilling, ideological control, and erosion of autonomy in their own work (pp. 775; 790-793). It is therefore necessary for teachers to resist the fad of so-called "teacher-proof kits" that make them into technicians (Hlebowitsh, 1990; Smith, 1986).

The practitioner's special knowledge is *praxis*, the know-how of the artisan or the artist. This know-how requires the coming together of conceptual or speculative knowledge and actual, particular, "non-textbooks situations". No practicing surgeon would choose to ignore or to follow blindly the laws of biology or chemistry; his challenge and special knowledge consist in determining the extent to which theoretical knowledge will affect his intervention. Where *technè* requires precise skills and results in performance and effectiveness in solving problems, *praxis* demands an array of knowledges – the health sciences, the sciences of education – and results in competence, not performance. While the technician has learned answers (tricks of his trade), the practitioner knows how to find the right questions or to identify the real problem in a cluster of issues, and to devise various ways of dealing with a multidimensional situation. This is why *praxis* (or professional work) values experience and wisdom, which is the elusive kind of knowledge only found in those who know how to use various knowledges.

At the very heart of practical knowledge is critical thinking. Classroom materials constantly present critical thinking first as a skill, i.e., technical know-how, and secondly as a skill to be developed in students. What Bayrou hopes to see, namely "*une révolution magistrale*" (1990, pp. 163-191), might very well start with teachers claiming for themselves that very capacity of critical thinking. This kind of thinking would help them to detect those instances when the logic, and sometimes even the logistics of technical means start dictating educational ends. In education as in other professions, *potestas* over the choice of means tends to take precedence over *auctoritas*, the capacity to deliberate about ends worth choosing. Critical thinking is also necessary if teachers are to start examining the language of education and the ideologies it carries in its depictions of the learner, learning, the teacher, and teaching.

The second or lateral dimension of professional authority is a moral attitude of commitment and comportment (Dingwall & Lewis, 1983, p. 89). It is, in fact, the moral character, the beliefs, values or, in one word, moral integrity of a professional that inspire trust and justify his autonomy. As has been stated, authority is one of a trinity, along with tradition and religion. Restoring this sense of moral trust and reliance requires first a better sense of tradition. Tradition is not the past; it is neither the opposite of the present nor the opposition to progress, but the thread which guides a civilization through its past into the present and towards its future. Without tradition, a culture not only becomes amnesiac; it deprives itself of one very important dimension of human experience, that of depth, "for memory and depth are the same or rather, depth cannot be reached by man except through remembrance" (Arendt, 1987, p. 94). Without a sense of tradition, there can be no sense of authority since *auctoritas* rests on the foundations; and without this

sense of unshakeable cornerstone and base, a civilization cannot have a sense of permanence, durability, resilience, or solid grounding, in a world which only endures by undergoing profound change.

A sense of tradition is also necessary for personal and social identity. In his reflections on some of the malaises of modernity, Taylor (1991) identifies atomism, the view of self and self-fulfilment as "neglecting or delegitimizing the demands that come from beyond (one's private) desires and aspirations, be they history, tradition, society, nature or God" (p. 58). With this view of the self as detached from or only functionally connected with other times, other cultures, other persons, we have been led, as a culture, to forget the fact that human beings are fundamentally dialogical beings; i.e., beings who define their identity, "always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the identities of significant others" (Taylor, 1991, p. 33). In a monological, monogenerational world, the very genesis of the human mind is compromised. Restoration of a sense of authority might very well start with the realization that the atomistic mode of thinking is misleading, because it ignores the human need for something other than the immediately familiar. It destroys the very condition of realization of human identity: dialogue, a sense of exchange with, and struggle against otherness.

In education, restoring a sense of authority will mean changing the pejorative connotations that the very word "tradition" carries. Surely, no one would argue for returning to the past, and especially not to the worst aspects of the past. But one wonders whether the new education did not, in its own way, give in to the temptation of turning the timers back to zero, in the hope of new beginnings. After a few decades of overthrowing the traditions of disciplines and methods of learning, a good number of teachers are more than ready to ask themselves if progress really demands a revolution quite so Copernican. Teachers and adults find themselves, whether they want to or not, in the position of mediators between the old and the new; the quality of their intervention depends on their evaluation of that thread linking generations. Denial of any value or revolt against the connection produces atomism; making that thread into a chain produces stagnation. Only the appreciation of the nature and relative value of that thread provides that which the young themselves identify as most necessary: models of maturity (Grand'Maison, 1992).

Religion is also one of the essential building blocks of civilizations, and as Arendt explains, the other element of the trinity. Few people would deny that institutional religions have given many a thinking person reason to lose belief in their dogmas and respect for many of their leaders. Here again, it is essential to distinguish between two concepts: belief and faith.

Believing is accepting a statement as true; having faith is acknowledging and caring for some horizon of meaning and value transcending oneself. A sense of religion is a sense of faith or of being in relation with (*religare*) a world of meanings over and above the here and now. It is difficult to conceive education without a sense of values transcending both the educator and the learner. As Taylor so aptly puts it: "If the youth really don't care for (values) that transcend the self, then what can you say to them?" (1991, p. 19). But, Taylor's reader might add, if adults don't care for values that transcend the self, what do they have to say?

A considerable number of today's youth is saying, in words and action, that three decades of authenticity conceived as radical originality - and therefore rejection of models and revolt against all convention - have only sent them on a quest for spirituality. They have sought meaning and moral direction in cults, astrology, the occult, gnosticism, and all forms of syncretism. The region of Montreal has 800 such groups called new religions; the U.S. has 10,000 of them (Grand'Maison, 1992b, p. 61). The problem with these new religions is not their novelty but the fact that for their faithful, believing amounts to reverting to magical thinking.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the nature and extent of powerlessness in the teaching profession is a well-established fact. It would therefore seem that empowering would be the only logical and adequate answer. In this case, it should be stressed that an essential part of the power attached to professional status is breadth and depth of specialized knowledge. But everyday experience and further reflection show that the sociopolitical power of professional status does not, in and of itself, answer the kinds of problems that teachers and other professionals are faced with today. This is, indeed, a crisis of confidence, a moral crisis.

This paper argues, therefore, that what needs to be restored is a sense of moral authority. This is not an *ex officio* prerogative, but an achievement, and furthermore, the result of a favorable assessment of the moral character of the person by those very persons whose lives are touched by his or her work. This is exactly the kind of reference the young are looking for today, in their quest for models of maturity. But professional status and power, in and of themselves, cannot restore that sense of reliance and trust; this is why empowering teachers is an answer in search of the question.

NOTES

1. This paper was first presented at the Third Conference of the International Network of Philosophers of Education, held in Varna, Bulgaria, August, 1992.
2. Educating could also refer to *educere*, to lead out of, to guide the child out of the limitations of the actual towards his own possibilities. Human beings are only formed by successive transformations.
3. The Report stresses the following points: 1. Teachers are not full partners at the level of decision making and formulation of educational policies; their input into decisions affecting their professional lives is restricted to implementation. 2. The bureaucratic notion of accountability is applied to education; the practice of measuring productivity in terms of input/output reduces education to an industrial process. 3. Lack of lateral career opportunities causes teachers seeking professional advancement to look for supervisory positions. 4. Teachers' workloads are made increasingly heavier with non-teaching duties such as personal care, administrative paperwork, and extracurricular activities. 5. Women who constitute the majority of members are seriously underrepresented in positions of responsibility.

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