



# The Riddle of Teacher Authority: Its Role and Significance in Waldorf Education

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*The following excerpts examine the relationship of Steiner's concept of teacher authority to the modern world. The second half of the paper (not included here) examines Steiner's work and the work of others on teacher authority specifically in Waldorf school classrooms.*

**T**he diverse nature and rapid pace of change in many areas over the last eighty years—technological, geopolitical, social, and economic, to name some—are key elements in a discussion of teacher authority. The dynamics of change raise questions concerning the continuing relevance of the concept of authority itself.

While Waldorf education continues to identify the concept of teacher authority as a guiding principle in the education of the child between the ages of 7 and 14,<sup>1</sup> the term is rarely included in writing in the wider educational community. There are several possible reasons for this: the waning of formal position and status in society over the last hundred years; the growth of progressive, liberal ideas in social and economic policy; the emergence of concepts of non-hierarchical forms of management and organization, the development of political and legal frameworks for the progressive realization of universal human rights, and respect for the dignity of the individual. Against this mosaic of developments, the term “authority” has tended to be associated, rightly or wrongly, with outmoded concepts of power, position, and patronage.

On a broad sociological level, however, Sennett (1980) describes authority as a basic human need: “Children need authorities to guide and reassure them. Adults fulfill an essential part of themselves in being authorities; it is one way of expressing care for others.” (p.15)

Yet it remains the case that in much of the lit-

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erature focusing on a critical examination of various models of effective schooling and school improvement (Hopkins, Ainscow, and West, 1994; Morley and Rassool, 1999), there are few references to “teacher authority.” Mention is made of “effective teaching” (Hopkins, p. 53) and Porter and Bradley (1988) go as far as to describe effective teachers as “semi-autonomous professionals.”

The following incident occurred at a Waldorf school in Britain, in a class of ten-year-olds:<sup>2</sup>

During mid-morning break, £4 went missing from a pupil's coat pocket. The coat had been left next to a tree in the play area. The incident was reported to the class teacher. No action was taken; the school day continued. That evening the class teacher telephoned the parents of the child whose money had disappeared. The following day, at the end of school, the teacher told the children an episode from her own childhood. The story recounted an incident of stealing and making amends. The tale was short, to the point, and attempted to convey the feelings of the different people involved. There was no explanation or discussion afterwards. With the story finished, the teacher mentioned that anyone who might be able to help find the lost money could come and speak with her when they were ready. The class was dismissed. All the children filed out of the room and one child returned soon after to tell the teacher that she had found

1. The ‘class teacher’ years constitute an eight-year program of main lessons, which a class teacher aims to bring to a class of children as they progress from class one (6/7 years), to class eight (13/14 years).

2. The incident was related to the author by a colleague.

the money in the school garden and added that she had a tummy ache. Following this, phone calls were made, the next day friendships were restored and resumed, and the incident was declared closed.

The manner in which the teacher handled this situation provides several indicators of teacher authority, as understood in Waldorf practice, and there are also echoes of what Hopkins (1997) refers to as an “authentic relationship” between the teacher and the pupils. According to Hopkins et al., one of the planks of an authentic teacher-pupil relationship is the intrinsic and “unconditional positive regard” (p.14) with which the teacher treats the pupils. Authentic relationships are provided for when the classroom is established

[A]s a safe and secure learning environment in which pupils can expect acceptance, respect, and even warmth from their teachers, without having to earn these—they are intrinsic rights which are extended to pupils because they are there ... the security and trust within the relationship will mean that the teacher is able to make demands on the pupils, because there is also support. (p.14)

The following events were observed at the beginning of the day in another class of nine- and ten- year-olds in a Waldorf school in Britain.<sup>3</sup> The pupils entered the classroom in a noisy and disorganized fashion. It took eight minutes to complete the roll call. One pupil made the following comments when asked a second time to indicate his presence: “She is so bloody dense. You daft woman! I’ll throw you in the bin. This is crap, this is boring.” During the remainder of the two-hour lesson, a poor culture prevailed. The hapless teacher struggled against constant back-chat, calling out, and pervasive negativity. Many of the activities collapsed or were curtailed. At no point were the pupils engaged by the lesson. The teacher appeared to accept the unfolding events in a passive manner. Low expectations, disaffection, stubbornness, and antipathy characterized the situation. Within months, the teacher left.

3. The author was present as an observer.

With a new teacher in place, the individual children and the class as a whole moved quickly into a different mode. Within a term, positive changes in the quality of classroom dynamics, the relationships between the children, the children’s attitudes to their work, their learning, their teachers, and themselves could be observed.

Questions might be raised about the level of training (the teacher had completed both Waldorf and state teacher training courses), the failures in classroom management techniques, or the level of special learning needs in the class. It is suggested, however, that a faltering ability on the part of the previous teacher to engage positively with the pupils—combined with a lack of clarity, reflection, and enthusiasm—created a scenario in which the children were unable to behave and the teacher was unable to cope. Fundamentally, it can be argued that an absence of teacher authority and authentic teacher-pupil relationships are demonstrated in this account. A basic condition of classroom health is missing. Children and teacher are both adversely affected when what Steiner (1982a) refers to as “unquestioned” authority is beyond the teacher’s reach.

This situation appears to support a contention made by Phillips (1996) that a “moral vacuum” in society and in education has opened up in the last fifty years or so. Highlighting what she sees as “the collapse of the authority of the teacher” (p. 50), Phillips (1995) points to a “flight from authority” on the part of teachers and parents as part of the legacy of decades of libertarian individualism. The nature of authority is described as conferring “upon the individual the status of a repository of superior wisdom” (p. 51). According to Phillips, the pursuit of individual adult freedom, untempered by a sense of responsibility, has created an empty space in place of parental authority. Children have been neglected in this process. With respect to education specifically, Phillips argues that the whole concept of education has become a threatened distortion of a doctrine of equality and individual rights:

This fundamental egalitarianism has destroyed the hierarchy of authority between the generations. The relationship between adults and children in both family and school, between parents and their offspring or between teachers and their

pupils, has gone into reverse with the effect of infantilizing adults and making children assume adult responsibilities well before they are ready. All external authority has been demolished. (pp. 64-65)

Other commentators point to the fact that in many parts of the community, authority appears to be diminishing as a quality or attribute, almost with each passing year. In the 1990s Tisdall (1994) described a situation in which

[S]hared confusion over values and standards, [and] contemptible and contemptuous moral relativism, extend from the power corridors of Washington and Westminster to the meanest streets of South-Central Los Angeles and London's East End. [They] affect individuals both powerful and anonymous. And through their common irresponsibility they infect one another and the contagion spreads, most damagingly to the young.

Today's hi-tech, "24-7," fast-lane society may well tempt individuals—figures of authority especially—to display "moral relativism" (Trigg, 2002) and a lack of presence. It is the case that we live in a more transparent society, one in which exposure and revelations of misconduct, weakness, and impropriety are reported daily. One difference from former times is that leaders today are less able to hide their manifold imperfections from a more conscious and more enquiring populace. Yet, far from being a phenomenon that affects a select few in the political and social limelight, it appears that the question of accountability and hence authority in human behavior is a widespread, perhaps endemic, problem in social culture.

Hargreaves (1994) summarizes the post-modern world as "fast, complex, compressed, and uncertain" (p.8). Current thinking and experience suggest that social and scientific progress is not inevitable, continuous, or necessarily beneficial. Irregular phenomena abound—from weather patterns to family configurations—while universal theories and truths are more complex than suggested by the ideals of the Enlightenment, which emphasized the primacy of human reason and rational thinking. In our postmodern time we recognize that theories and ideas are often directly

related to and influenced by context and conditions, as well as tradition and reason. Stoll and Fink (1996) describe the contemporary educational situation in graphic terms: "It is within a context of unrest, questioning, diversity, complexity, and changing concepts of time and space that schools must adjust to compelling but contradictory forces" (p. xii).

In common with other schools, Steiner schools are not isolated from the effects of these currents of social, cultural, and economic change. There are questions concerning the role and form of the family, the structure of the school day, and the concept of school itself. There is discussion of emerging concepts such as lifelong learning, the "24-7" school, and a range of policies in the "rights sphere"—such as inclusion, child protection, health and safety, testing, and record-keeping. There is much consideration of the social aspects of changing employment patterns and work practices. There is an uneasy juxtaposition of calls for pluralism and localism in a global society of equal access, equal opportunity, accountability, and shared standards. In such a wide-ranging and far-reaching context, no classroom or social organism is immune or isolated from such currents of change.

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- For additional information on this topic see Trevor Mepham's article "The Art and Science of Classroom Management" in Research Bulletin X, #2.*