The Role Of Authoritativeness In Educational Relationships: A Theoretical Reflection

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Abstract: This article aims to analyse the central role of authoritativeness in educational relationships. An initial terminological clarification will assert the need to give due weight to authoritativeness as distinct from authority and authoritarianism. The essential, irreplaceable function of authoritativeness in educational processes will then be analysed. Learning takes place, in fact, only in situations of asymmetry between those taking part. The delicate functioning of the authoritative educational relationship depends on an unequal distribution of power aimed solely at maturing the learner's critical capacities. It follows that autonomy – the facile fetish of subjectivist educational theory – can be achieved only through acceptance of a well-established authoritative relationship.

Keywords: educational authority, authoritativeness, autonomy, educational relationship

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Authority, authoritarianism and authoritativeness: a terminological clarification

Etymologically speaking, the derivation from the Latin verb *augere* provides strong evocative and educational resonances: "For the original Latin word 'auctoritas' denoted notions like those of 'producing', 'originating' and 'inventing'" (Peters, 1966, p. 2).

In itself, the original idea was that of an "empowering" function as the principal feature of the authoritative role: authority is exercised to enable those under it to "grow" or to "develop".

This would seem to be the most effective way to implement the link between "power" and "actor" (or "agency"). If "power is the basic energy needed to initiate and sustain action or, to put it another way, the capacity to translate intention into reality and sustain it" (Bennis & Nanus, 1999, p. 52), individuals, in their relations with authority, come concretely "little by little to assume roles, to become actors (understood in the Latin sense of *auctor*, from the verb *augere*)" (Donati, 2006, p. 30). Ideally, then, authority's task is to handle power so that individuals become "actors", and to provide them with the tools to become "creative" in the full sense of the term.

Any sociological consideration of power relationships must of necessity start from Max Weber's analytical definition of the terms "domination", "discipline" and "power", and their specific sources of legitimation. Before quoting his essential points, however, a word of warning is in order. The terminology adopted by Weber, and by the sociologists who followed him, comes up against semantic difficulties, not least because of the need to translate them into different languages. Clearly, certain distinctions are unlikely to match completely in German, English and Italian.

Domination should be understood, according to Weber, as "the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons", and discipline as "the probability that by virtue of habituation a command will receive prompt and automatic obedience in stereotyped forms, on the part of a given group of persons" (Weber, 1999, p. 52). The first aspect to emphasize is that *domination is a relationship*: it is not a matter of one who commands and another who obeys. For "every genuine form of domination implies a minimum of voluntary compliance, that is, an interest (based on ulterior motives or genuine acceptance) in obedience" (Weber, 1999, p. 205). This obedience, therefore, may be

inevitable or it may be "prompt, automatic" and "stereotyped", in which case it is called "discipline". As Sennett has ably summed it up, "the habit of obedience is discipline" (Sennett, 2006, p. 81). Obedience, moreover, may have "interior" motives (linked, that is to say, to the acceptance of those obeying) or "exterior" ones (accepted because imposed by others).

Weber, lastly, defines what he calls "power" as "the ability of an individual or group to achieve their own goals or aims when others are trying to prevent them from realising them" (Sennett, 2006, *p.* 51)

As for the motives of those obeying (since they must have some), these may be based on "a variety of considerations, from simple habituation to a purely rational consideration of advantage" (Sennett 2006, p. 205).

The first clarification necessary for our enquiry will enable us to distinguish between three fundamental terms derived from the same lexical root, two widely used in social science literature, the third rather less: "authority", "authoritarianism" and "authoritativeness".

It might be felt that the distinction between the first two terms does not depend so much on whether domination is applied or violence used: an established authority can be just as hard and unjust as an authoritarian one. The difference lies, rather, in their different forms of legitimation. Authority is based on widely approved legitimation, in the name of the system, of tradition or of habits. Authoritarianism legitimizes itself, making improper use of its authority. Authority can be replaced in democratic or empowering ways. Authoritarian domination, on the other hand, ends with the natural death or withdrawal of the autocrat or with the violent assertion of a stronger power.

The relationship of these two types with freedom has been effectively and vividly summed up by Freire (1996, p. 159): "Just as authority cannot exist without freedom, and vice versa, authoritarianism cannot exist without denying freedom, nor license without denying authority".

And authoritativeness? It is significant that this semantic variant widely used in Italy – "autorevolezza" – is little used in other languages. The literature consulted, in fact, made only rare reference to this aspect of domination which implies, nevertheless, strong and promising relational implications.

Authoritativeness is the strength of those who know. We might liken it to the credibility of the *expert*, if this did not risk impoverishing the vast terrain of such *knowledge*. We could say that people are *authoritative* who (to our eyes) show that *they know things that interest us and which we*

know only partly or not at all. Paraphrasing Luhmann, we can say that our recognition of *trust* of a person's authoritativeness is a process reached "by an extrapolation from the available information". As Simmel noted, it is 'a mixture of knowledge and ignorance'" (Luhmann, 2002, p. 42).

Authoritativeness *does not coerce obedience and does not punish* disobedience. It is consequently *optional*; its very existence depends upon *free recognition* of it. We may therefore say that the process of accepting authoritativeness is not underpinned by laws or binding commitments that would be punished if broken. It is a purely *moral decision*. It arises from an essentially *personal* recognition, *not binding but advantageous.*

Certain features of the particular form of social relationship we are calling "authoritativeness" may be gleaned, perhaps, from Arendt's description of "authority" (which the German philosopher considers extinct, in any case), where she states decisively that "where force is used, authority itself has failed" (Arendt, 1999, p. 132). We have already discussed the difficulty of translating strongly representative terms into different languages. To all effects, when Arendt sustains that the principal feature of those holding authority is that their power is "somehow nil", and that authority is "mere advice, needing neither the form of command nor external coercion to make itself heard" (Arendt, 1999, p. 168), we are close to the distinction we attempted to make with our trinity *authority, authoritarianism and authoritativeness.*

Now we come to the most interesting, not to say critical, aspect of this third form: *what type of knowledge makes for authoritativeness?* We have already mentioned the figure of the *expert,* whom John Dewey's pedagogical exaltation has raised to the top of the social credibility hierarchy. From this point of view, we can say that one person is more authoritative than another because *he or she knows more than the other* about the *matter at the heart of their relationship.* This may occur even in brief or trivial situations, such as asking a passer-by the way. When authoritativeness touches upon the capacity to clarify the *sense of things and of existence*, it is enriched by the particular energy we call *charisma.*

Any recognition of authoritativeness requires, lastly, the placing of *trust,* and so it carries a *risk*. I read the signs of the other person's wisdom, but I do not know how far it goes, up to what point "he knows". I must therefore trust the other up to that point, even though I do not know beforehand where it leads.

There are two fundamental terms for understanding the pattern of social relationships characterized by asymmetries of domination: "Experience shows that in no instance does domination voluntarily limit itself to the appeal to material or affectual or ideal motives as a basis for its continuance. In addition every such system attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy" (Weber, 1999, p. 208). "Belief" (in) "legitimacy" is therefore a condition for exercising "human" domination, that is to say, domination over men rather than animals or things.

It is well known that Weber identified the roots of legitimation in the tripartite division of *rational, traditional* and *charismatic* domination. Recently, some sociologists (Pace & Hemmings, 2007) have insisted on a fourth root – the *professional* root. Nevertheless, the "belief" dimension of the authoritative relationship is undoubtedly that which principally concerns our enquiry. More explicitly, "according to the German sociologist, legitimacy is a 'belief': an institution is perceived as legitimate when a collectivity believes that it has the right to govern or make decisions" (D'Agati, 2015, p. 1505).

Authority, as a social relationship, cannot exist without the recognition extended by the "belief" of those following it: "People will not obey willingly if they consider the authority illegitimate". Authority is "a belief in legitimacy" (Sennett, 2006, p. 21), to the extent that "one of the deepest marks the French Revolution made on modern thinking was to convince us that we must destroy the legitimacy of rulers in order to change their power. Destroy faith in them, then we can change their regimes" (Sennett, 2006, p. 38).

Let us clarify, in line with Luhmann's research, that belief is more often than not applied "automatically"; we are rarely called to reflect upon it. Indeed, our limited energies would have to be freed from other commitments. It is therefore granted as a matter of routine, based upon a personal and collective "history" that ensures an adequate – never total – degree of trustworthiness. "Under ordinary circumstances, the subordinates trust the superordinate's competence and good faith … Much of the time authority works because the subordinates … accept the definitions of these matters supplied to them by superordinates. They usually do this because they are subordinates as a result of ascriptive positions which they have always held" (Metz, 1978, p. 29).

The fact that a person is "put" in a certain place therefore leads, of its own accord, to practices supported by "belief in the system".

Let us see now how the practices and problems of authority, briefly illustrated above, inevitably interact with educational processes.

Authority and learning

Each of us is introduced to the sense of things – language first of all – by symbolic procedures. We start from the fact that the reality of daily life is for us a "pre-ordered" reality. This order is not natural but social. It changes from one society to another and we therefore have to learn it in order not to be "out of step" when we give a name to things.

To use an (excessively?) strong image, for Durkheim (1922), socialization (learning) creates in man a "new being". This "creative virtue", moreover, is a "special privilege" of human education. Learning therefore develops "as a product of a social community of practice where people are involved in different types of processes to create meaning. Learning is, consequently, a social and collective process" (Amhag & Jakobson, 2009, p. 657).

The learning process presents many richly fascinating aspects, such as its inter-relationship with identity building, its remarkable capacity to generate something "new" that was not there before and its ability bring out a special harmony between human rationality and natural-physical structures. One aspect, however, has received little comment: our species seem to be the only one in which the learning process is "intentionally programmed". Indeed, "although it is true that many of the higher primate species learn by observation of their elders, there is no evidence that those elders do anything to instruct their charges in the performance of the skill in question. What distinguishes man as a species is not only his capacity for learning, but for teaching as well" (Wood, Bruner & Ross 1976, p. 89).

In other words: animals learn but do not teach. In the animal world, *imitation* is enough to transmit the required strategies. Only man translates the "training" of the young into a *reflexive*, voluntary, calculated and consequential *plan*.

It is therefore important to clarify what "transmitting knowledge" means. According to some widely-accepted interpretations, the process is likened to a transfer of information. Precedence is thereby given to a concept of teaching that places transmission above the acquisition of critical capacity. A concept rooted in the premise that teaching amounts to

depositing "prefixed parcels of knowledge into allegedly empty student minds" (Shor, 1996, p. 27), and that learning itself may be reduced to "a mere technique of assimilation" (Recalcati, 2014, p. 126). In this perspective, it is evident that the function of the authoritative figure is greatly reduced.

If, however, we consider transmission as the transfer of not just "information" but of experience, things look different, not least when we come to the central questions of the educational process. The issue no longer concerns the quantity of notions transmitted, but rather the "possibility of initiating the subject to a vital relationship with knowledge". That is to say, "working around the objects of knowledge taking into account the relationship they have with the life of the subject who is to assimilate them" (Recalcati, 2014, p. 37).

Looked at this way, only those who have experience can transfer it, at the same time encouraging the assimilator's critical faculties. According to this concept, one of the most important tasks of the school is "to provide the tools and to develop the skills through which the [student] can create his or her own experience" (Eisner, 1988, p. 15).

It is interesting, then, especially within what is now called "info-society", to grasp the difference between knowledge and information, considering the former as the specific and appropriate goal of any learning process: "… knowledge gives meaning to new information, by allowing people to interpret new facts and by helping society to understand what significance to attach to them. Knowledge itself develops through the appropriation of new experience. But the latest knowledge is linked organically to that which preceded it" (Furedi, 2012, p. 175). In the last resort, it is a question of reasserting the link between word and life: "The breakage of this link gives rise to a form of knowledge transmission that excludes criticism and obliges assimilation and performance" (Recalcati, 2014, p. 29).

This "organic critical capacity" is hard to attain. Only a superficial or ideological approach can expect this of a young person's "natural" capacities. In this case, too, the authoritative person is the one who, etymologically, "cultivates", through careful stimulation, the learner's existing potentials for judgement. We therefore have to try to answer some questions asked some time ago: "What is authority, what function or dysfunction may it represent, how do the vertical and horizontal (symmetric and asymmetric) dimensions integrate or hinder the processes of learning?"

(Bellini, 2012, p. 109). Indeed, "the particular relevance of the concept of authority for education lies in the question of whether or not human learning is possible without it" (Winch, 2012, p. 223).

"Classic" sociology has expressed itself explicitly – perhaps excessively so – on this subject: "In order that there be education, there must be a generation of adults and one of youth, and an influence exercised by the first on the second … education is the action exercised by the adult generations over those that are not yet ready for social life. Its purpose is to arouse and develop in the child a certain number of physical, intellectual and moral states which are demanded of him both by the political society as a whole and by the specific environment for which he is particularly destined" (Durkheim, 1971, pp. 36 and 40). "… inside the school, there has to be by definition a dominance-submission relationship between the teacher and his pupil. … This dominance-submission aspect is a basic condition of the relationship between the teacher and his pupils. Even if it is arrived at by Neill's methods of waiting for inner development in the child, the final recognition that this adult has something to give for which his pupils must accept conditions that allow him to teach them, has to be made" (Mannheim, 1975, pp. 203 and 222).

Significant though the achievements obtained under "democratic" practices may be, it is difficult to sustain today that these successes are due *sic et simpliciter* to the reduced distance between teacher and student. If methodologies better able to develop young people's personal talents have taken root, this stems not so much from the abolition of authority, as from more suitable handling of it.

Early in the last century, Vygotsky was already stressing how the emergence of the child's psychological functions was enabled and strengthened by interaction with adults or with "more skilled" contemporaries. The difference lies in the way this necessary asymmetry is "managed".

The "zone of proximal development" is the basic, irreplaceable means for transmitting "the sense of the world" from the adult generation to the younger one. Any generational change brings with it an inevitable gap to be bridged. Thus, "The unity of history and biography is broken. In order to restore it, and thus to make intelligible both aspects of it, there must be 'explanations' and justifications of the salient elements of the institutional tradition. Legitimation is this process of 'explanation' and justification" (Berger & Luckmann, 1969, p. 133).

It is important to note the *interdependence between sense of history* (and so of the present) *and authority*. Put in other words, "The authority of adults is inextricably linked to the status enjoyed by the experience of the past" (Furedi, 2012, p. 12). Viewed this way, "The crisis of authority in education is most closely connected with the crisis of tradition, that is with the crisis in our attitude toward the realm of the past. This aspect of the modern crisis is especially hard for the educator to bear, because it is his task to mediate between the old and the new, so that his very profession requires of him an extraordinary respect for the past" (Arendt, 1999, p. 251). It can be stated, therefore, that "the principle of authority has always rested on an unvarying structure: the pairing of authority with anteriority. Anteriority, seniority, pre-existence with respect to the young person represents a source of anterior authority, because it incarnates the possibility of transmitting culture" (Benasayag & Schmit, 2004, p. 29).

It must be borne in mind that this is a reciprocal process, in the sense that, while authority plays a central role in the field of education, education plays a central role in the creation, legitimation and acceptance of authority: "Education and authority are dependent upon each other for existence. We tend to forget this too often today" (Mason, 1954, p. 340).

From this point of view, education can be reasonably considered an intergenerational process because it "not only tells the individual why he should do one thing rather than another; it also tells him why things are the way they are" (Berger & Luckmann, 1969, p. 134): in this sense, therefore, it may be deemed "part of the moral responsibility one generation owes to another" (Seaton & McKnight, 1975, p. 7).

Consequently, "The authority was rejected by adults and this can only mean one thing: that the adults refuse to take responsibility for the world in which the children were brought" (Arendt, 1999, p. 248).

What relational process, then, is most appropriate to the encouragement of a proper development of the younger generation's critical faculties? "The type of relation most beneficial in educational encounters is dialogue" (Sidorkin, 2002, p. 139).

The dialogic process – central, we will recall, to Socrates' philosophy – is considered the only one truly appropriate to the educational context. It has therefore been the subject of research and lively discussion by students of the human sciences.

The most modern considerations on dialogic processes generally cite the philosophers Martin Buber and Michail Bakhtin. The former asked "But by

what could a man so really become a person as by the strict and sweet experiences of dialogue?" (Buber, 1993, p. 207), while understanding, for the latter (1986) is always in the nature of a dialogue and all human communication is organized socially through dialogic interaction.

From the psychological viewpoint, too, the perception of a context, that is to say a genuinely dialogic environment, is one of the strongest motivations to an attitude of "opening up", the basic premise for any kind of learning. Indeed, "we open up only to those who are reciprocally open. Only when we experience a true dialogue do we let our guard down" (Sidorkin, 2002, p. 143).

This introduces the first problem regarding application of the dialogic method in a scholastic context; its compatibility with the authoritative dimension. ".. how to reconcile dialogical relation with power asymmetry?" (Sidorkin, 2002, p. 139).

Buber himself was perplexed by this forced coexistence of dimensions that prove essential, but also conflictual, in asymmetrical relations.

While authority may hinder true dialogue, there is also the opposite risk. If dialogue becomes "total" opening, it becomes a "procedure without a preordained end. We do not know what truth will be reached and there is no subject – the 'teacher' – controlling the process. The teacher can only accompany the 'pupils' in their journey, having a little more experience of the rules to follow, what to avoid and what result can be expected" (Maccarini, 2003, p. 241). Dialogue then becomes an opening without boundaries. It has no goal and continually defers any concrete result. In the long run, this naïve concept of the educational relationship "confuses children and parents in a single indistinct melange" (Recalcati, 2014, p. 32). Indeed, "in a symmetrical relationship, two human beings establish a contractual-type relationship between each other. In such a context, it is difficult for parents and children to keep faith with their role since, in the name of respect for individual liberty, they feel a continual need to justify their decisions to the young person, who accepts or rejects their proposals in a relationship of equality" (Benasayag & Schmit, 2004, p. 26).

The "educational dialogue", if we wish to call it that, "has an aim and is guided by one of the partners. The asymmetrical nature of the educational dialogue is inherent to the situation" (Postic, 1994, p. 119). Precisely because it is "inherent", once the relationship between adults/teachers and young people becomes equal, "the inevitable result is an inadequate relationship, a source of discomfort and unease for all concerned"

(Mascherpa, 2016, p. 121).

The writer who seems to find a way out of this apparently irresolvable contradiction is Bakhtin, who distances himself firmly from the "dialogue-equality" equation and "sublimates" the asymmetrical relationship to the concept of "polyphony". "The problem of imbalanced relation is not to be countered with power sharing based on considerations of equality; it needs to be addressed with polyphony, the principle of engaged co-existence of multiple yet unmerged voices. Bakhtin's principle of polyphony offers a new way of reconciling power imbalance with mutuality of relation" (Sidorkin, 2002, p. 145).

Polyphonic authority creates reciprocity, the most suitable method for an effective educational process. "The problem lies not with the authoritative statements themselves but with the way the internal dialogicality of such statements is misunderstood or misrepresented. What is missing is the right relational context" (Sidorkin, 2002, p. 147).

The educational relationship

"It is an illusion to think knowledge can be transmitted without involving a relationship with the person incarnating that knowledge, because teaching exists only in the context of a human relationship" (Recalcati, 2014, p. 126). But, granted this irreplaceable process, can we still call it a relationship when one participant is more bound than the other, to the extent of being in a position of marked inferiority? The educational relationship has, like other social relationships, features of its own. These are adjustable up to a point, but only insofar as this does not mutate the relationship to the extent of prejudicing its identity, or even its existence. It is therefore important to identify these features in order to deal suitably with this specific type of relationship.

In the first place, the commonest educational relationship, the "scholastic" one, is compulsory for the learner up to a certain age (16 in Italy). This in itself places certain restrictions on the relationship. Even beyond the years of compulsory schooling, students normally receive "no pay for compliant participation. Other extrinsic rewards are meager […] Students must go to school whether they want to or not, by compulsion of law" (Metz, 1978, pp. 30-31).

Thus, "unlike doctors, lawyers, and other professionals, a teacher's job

is to develop knowledge, skills, and habits in children and adolescents who are involuntary clients" (Pace & Hemmings, 2007, p. 7).

This already marks an inevitable feature of the educational relationship, one which, if underestimated, can lead to improper handling of the relationship itself. In fact, while relations between professional figures and clients are normally voluntary and clients pay their chosen professional, "teachers and students are stuck with each other" (Bidwell, 1970).

The first result of this is that the educational relationship cannot be treated as a simple professional relationship, since it lacks the basic premise of an equal and voluntary exchange.

From this arises a second problem. Is it possible to have a real dialogic relationship, that is to say the strategy deemed most effective, even essential, for success in the learning process? As we have seen, Buber initially seems to rule this out, since the objective situation of one who gives help and another who receives it excludes the possibility of a one-to-one relationship. "For Buber spontaneity is an important characteristic of dialogue: '... for what I call dialogue, there is essentially necessary the moment of surprise'. One cannot have a plan of dialogue; neither can one set a purpose for dialogue. In contrast to this, teaching by any definition remains a purposeful and planned activity […] Of course, teaching may be full of surprises and improvisations, but it does not cease to be a purposeful activity" (Sidorkin, 2002, p. 141).

Looked at this way, we cannot enter a true dialogic relationship with students while still remaining teachers.

In reality, the Austrian philosopher's thought becomes clearer when on "Another occasion, he proclaims 'The relation in education is one of pure dialogue.' In other words, he does not think that asymmetrical situations preclude mutuality. Teachers and students can relate to each other in a direct and mutual way. Yet mutuality does not overcome the asymmetry of relation; it does not solve the power imbalance problem" (Sidorkin, 2002, p. 142).

At this point, however, "If educational authority is a relation, we must also be able to discern how things get learned within this relation" (Bingham, 2004, p. 31).

Certainly, while the "methodological" aspect does not resolve the entire range of implicit problems, it may be a "pointer" to the truthfulness or authenticity of the interaction. In the classroom, "a question may be open in its form but closed by the teacher's conduct, because the students know,

through non-verbal indicators, that only one answer is expected: the answer dependant on previously used knowledge or procedures. In such a case, students prefer not reply, for fear of being wrong. And, if they give a different answer from the expected one, the teacher rejects it without explanation. The lack of an answer is a symptom of the unsuitability of the question and of its closed nature. […] It is the teacher who encourages and guides pupils' conduct […]. The climate in the classroom depends on how the teacher conceives the educational dialogue" (Postic, 1994, p. 99).

In our opinion, however, there is a neuralgic point even more decisive than *methodological inappropriateness*, a point where reciprocity ceases to be mere "semblance" or "concession" of dialogue and can express the sincerity expected by those taking part. It is this neuralgic point that supports true *reflexivity*, that is to say a real *critical* spirit in the learner, even towards authority itself. "The point of a relational account of educational authority is to show that it is within the power of the student to discern between the authority that will lead to flourishing and the authority that will quash it" (Bingham, 2004, p. 37).

This task is as vital as it is delicate, for it is not a matter of merely transmitting rules and ensuring they are obeyed, nor even of transmitting the values underlying family and social life. It is a far deeper and more intimate dimension, through which we establish and stabilize the *ultimate criteria* for the maturing individual's assessment of rules and values. The teacher's task, therefore, "is not only to convey the importance and excitement of science and to display gradually how the world looks when revealed by the search-light of scientific theories; it is also to initiate others into the procedures by means of which such assumptions, which include his own, can be assessed […] Paradoxically enough a teacher must both be an authority and teach in such a way that pupils become capable of showing him where he is wrong" (Peters, 1966, p. 9).

The deepest and most delicate aspect of the educational process is that involving the declaration (when one is able and willing to do so), not just of the rules and values, but of the legitimacy according to the single individual's *criteria of evaluation*. Authority, therefore, plays a decisive role "in any educational endeavor, if for no other reason than for obtaining definitions of terms with which to think" (Mason, 1954, p. 340).

This is clearly one of the human being's eternal "moral" questions. "Is the issue of how to form solid personalities, rooted in civil values and able to give a sense to their personal experience, doomed to remain forever an

ideological matter, or will it be left to moral nostalgia?" (Scanagatta & Maccarini, 2009, p. 8).

Teaching means leaving a mark. The mark left by an authority that, etymologically, "does its job" (that is to say, enables students to "grow"), is that of making students capable of recognizing when it has these features. "Most non relational accounts of authority leave the student with just two options: submit or don't submit […] Rather, students might be encouraged to employ and deploy, to embrace and even manipulate authority" (Bingham, 2004, p. 35).

If students do not develop a disposition to question teachers and texts, it is because "Too often teachers themselves do not question the texts which in turn constitute the essence of the curriculum" (Romanish, 1995, p. 22). It arises, therefore, from a lack of "critical spirit" in the teachers themselves.

Clearly, if the "three" authorities in the field (*teacher* and *students* "versus" *content*) collaborate, the educational process becomes fully effective. This "threefold" collaboration has recently been summarized with the interesting term of *scaffolding*.

In the mid-1970s, an article was published by three psychologists who showed (with much empirical evidence) that the most effective way of teaching children to solve problems (in their example, how to build a pyramid with small wooden bricks) is to "scaffold" their activity for as long as necessary. *To scaffold*, therefore, means sustaining an operative situation with supports that are taken away when the endeavour is completed.

The three authors reassess radically the ways in which the basic principles of problem solving are transmitted, as well as the educational processes aimed at children's acquisition of skills. They are critical of the usual view of the young student as an isolated agent, lacking assistance. "Managing it by yourself" is not always the best way of truly managing it. The tutor's intervention must amount to more than that. "More often than not, it involves a kind of "scaffolding" process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted effort. This scaffolding consists essentially of the adult "controlling" those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner's capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence" (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976, p. 90).

As can be imagined, two preconditions are necessary for this procedure to succeed. The first is to prioritize the process of learning in accordance

with the young person's potential skills rather than the tutor's capacity to apply theories and strategies. The second is for the tutor to be properly sensitive in understanding "what" skills the child already has and, starting from these, what he or she can gain from a particular educational programme.

In short, "Well executed scaffolding begins by luring the child into actions that produce recognizable-for-him solutions. Once that is achieved, the tutor can interpret discrepancies to the child. Finally, the tutor stands in a confirmatory role until the tutee is checked out to fly on his own" (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976, p. 96)

We have mentioned this particular "educational approach" called *scaffolding* because it is one of the many ways authority can be applied in the most appropriate manner. It is also necessary if growth is to be accompanied until acquisition of a critical conscience. In this case, "those in a condition of authority use their position to help those subject to them to gradually reduce their inferiority […]. A relationship of authority is thereby cancelled over time to become an equal and reciprocal relationship" (De Grada, 1972, pp. 161-166).

Once an educational context with these features has been achieved, the adult-child interaction is constantly redefined by those involved as part of an ongoing "intersubjectivity". Little by little, as the children master their task, the adults reduce their control over it, guiding the children in a continual expansion of their skills.

In short, educators "point the way, then let the pupils set out and explore ahead of them. They intervene to avoid false steps or falls. They guide, because they know where the journey leads, but the pupils choose the way. It would be wrong for educators to refuse to assume their functions, or to falsify them with excessive authority, or to prolong their authority when it is no longer needed. Theirs is a temporary action; they are there to help conquer a stage and then disappear" (Postic, 1994, p. 120).

Conclusions: education and authoritativeness

Can we aim today at a reassessment of the authoritative educational relationship? Hannah Arendt ruled it out, but Durkheim believed it essential for the social future. He identified its root in the teacher's fundamental "conviction". … he must believe not in himself, nor in the superior

qualities of his intelligence or sensibility, but in his task and in the greatness of his task. What constitutes the authority that colours so easily the discourse of the priest is the lofty idea that he has of his mission, for he speaks in the name of a god in whom he believes, to whom he feels closer than the host of the profane. The secular teacher can and must have something of this feeling. He is also the instrument of a great moral entity that goes beyond him, that of society" (Durkheim, 1971, p. 60).

We may wonder: what teacher today could expect to rediscover their lost credibility on this basis? Authoritativeness certainly *makes use* of techniques, strategies, procedures and theoretical or moral configurations deemed appropriate to achieve the various temporary goals. But it *is not of itself*, and cannot be reduced to, such methodologies and ideologies, however appropriate they are. It is, instead, a *factor emerging from the relationship bound to the pupil's* – and so the teacher's – growth *and to trial by experience*. An authoritative relationship is set up when domination is *really* functional to the acquisition of knowledge potentially "good" for the young person.

How can domination and good coexist? How can we intervene to form a conscience without alienating it, our goal being, rather, to make it "autonomous"? What is real autonomy?

No one doubts – not even the Frankfurt school, as has been noted – the need for a father to impose discipline on his immature son. The real problem is how to do it without being repressive. Seen this way, the only guarantee "lies in the fact that the father, in his turn, is subject to the discipline of a relationship that requires him to act in the name of an objective – external or common – good transcending the relationship" (Donati, 1978, p. 43).

Let us glean two aspects from this description. Firstly, that of "an objective – external or common – good transcending the relationship". Authoritativeness take concrete form with the "sacrifice" of an ideal reference to something possessed by neither of the two parties, with respect to which each must freely concede his own wellbeing and in the interest of which the knowledge of one is at the "service" of the other's enrichment. The second aspect arises from the first. This "sacrifice" requires "reciprocity", in which the inevitable asymmetry imposes – especially upon the guiding party – genuine reciprocal acceptance of everything "new" that the relationship may be able to generate.

Another very effective description of the nature of the authoritative

relationship is Richard Sennett's commentary on the fascinating spectacle of the celebrated conductor Pierre Monteux on the podium: "There was no coercion, no threat; there was simply a man who was trying to help one be better. Better, that is, play what he wanted, for he knew. … And this too is an essential ingredient of authority: someone who has strength and uses it to guide others through disciplining them, changing how they act by reference to a higher standard" (Sennett, 2006, p. 17).

Here, too, we may glean significant phrases. An authoritative person is one *trying to help one be better,* taking into account his skills and with reference to *a higher standard,* that "objective – external or common – good transcending the relationship". It is becoming ever clearer that authoritativeness is a highly demanding "job". It requires us to keep constantly in mind the "objective" good of the other, a higher standard not in abstract, but in the concrete context in which the relationship is implemented. It requires us to know the paths that are supposedly the most suitable for its achievement, using our greater competence and knowledge responsibly and respectfully for the other's betterment. It requires us to understand the stage of development achieved by the other, not a year ago or even a week ago but now, in the situation to be faced, in order to induce from him the growth rate of which he is capable in this particular context.

The authoritative relationship is therefore essential to individuals' human and social development, while at the same time it is something very risky – pertinent reference might be made here to the loving relationship. Nevertheless, there are no alternatives to this risk that do not involve the loss of essential human values and features. "One of the reasons autonomy elicits such strong feelings is that many people have come to believe that to be autonomous means to be free. Autonomy builds a barrier against the world; once shielded, a person can live as he or she wants. […] This individual is isolated, troubled and dissatisfied: seeking freedom via autonomy generates a feeling of anguish" (Sennett, 2006, pp. 105-106).

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