

Abstract

Under what conditions are student rejections of teacher authority legitimate? This paper used Keddie's (1971) discussion of classroom knowledge as a critique of Peters' (1966) widely accepted analysis and justification of teacher authority. The contention is that Peters' justification relies upon contrafactual presuppositions about what the teacher knows and what the teacher teaches. As such, it functions to legitimate a perspective of teacher authority which is misleading as a reflection of classroom practice. The author argues that what would in theory be considered (philosophically justified) authority based on superior disciplinary knowledge is in fact an extension of (sociologically explained) institutional power. This has important implications for the view that an aim of education is the promotion of autonomous rationality.

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Epistemic Authority, Institutional Power, and Curricular Knowledge

In his discussion of the legitimate grounds of authority in education, Peters¹ is concerned to ground the acceptance of authority *rationaly* on the teacher's superior knowledge. This paper argues that if Keddie's² observations on the epistemic character of differentiated curricula are factually warranted, the acceptance of the teachers' authority may be *irrational*, even though such authority is grounded in superior knowledge. Implications follow from the analysis of epistemic authority and curricular knowledge which indicate the promotion of contradictory educational aims, where differentiated curricula are used and epistemic authority is enforced.

Moreover in his examination of authority and education³ Richard Peters observes that "... people are led to probe into the fundamental principles underlying the institution of authority only when an established way of conducting affairs is crumbling, or when some radical departure from an established practice is afoot."⁴ The paper argues that the present situation in education has undergone, and is undergoing radical departures from practice as it was conceptualized by Peters and that the presuppositions upon which his discussion of authority in education is based are no longer relevant to educational practice. Because recent sociology of education has taken changes in educational policy and practice into account, it offers a useful critical perspective on a widely accepted philosophical thesis - a thesis which mistakenly (even if inadvertently) functions to legitimate forms of institutional power by misconstruing these as rationally grounded authority relations.

Peter's position is essentially that "in the teaching profession ... there is ... a conflation of the notion of 'in authority' and 'an authority'."⁵

The teacher is an authority figure in both the above senses. He is put *in* authority to do a certain job for the community and to maintain social control in the school while he is doing it. He must also be an authority on some aspect of the culture of the community which he is employed to transmit. It is also expected that, to a certain extent, he will be an expert on the behaviour and development of the children over whom he is in authority, and on methods of teaching them.⁶

The teacher thus has *de jure* authority which he holds in virtue of his office, as well as *de facto* authority, which he holds in virtue of his knowledge of his subject (epistemic authority) and his expertise in applying knowledge about learners to the concrete question of teaching methods.

In concerning himself with elucidating the grounds of entitlement of those 'in authority', Peters argues that it is rational to place those who are authorities in this second, *de facto* sense, in *de jure* authority in educational institutions.

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He offers two reasons for accepting the (provisional) authority of persons who are in possession of superior knowledge and skills. First, that "under modern conditions no man can hope to be very knowledgeable in more than one or two spheres" ... so that, given the rationality of seeking the epistemologically strongest basis for action, the individual "must necessarily avail himself as best he can of expert opinion. This means consulting the relevant authorities."⁷

Second, assuming the importance of transmitting and developing knowledge, and assuming that the development of institutions is necessary for this purpose, the only rational form of organization of these institutions will be such that persons with superior knowledge and skills act as teachers and advisors to others, and participate in the administration of institutions dedicated to that end. Peters suggests that while public accountability is demanded, laymen ought not to hold 'too much' authority in academic institutions, else "the development of knowledge may be distorted by too much concern for what is of immediate use"⁸ and too little concern for the standards of excellence within knowledge itself, which ought to inform, on his view, its development as well as its transmission to others.

The rational justification offered, then, for putting the teacher *in* authority, is framed in terms of the teachers' being *an* authority, in two respects. Peters explains that if the teachers' *de jure* authority is rationally grounded, then given his necessary concern with both what is transmitted, and how it is transmitted, the teacher has a dual role: "His job is to initiate others into what is regarded as worthwhile in itself." This is based, as noted, on his *de facto* authority, in virtue of his superior knowledge of what is to be transmitted. Thus he is granted *de jure* authority to train people for some occupation and to act as an agent for selection in the competition for jobs and for higher education" (as well as to maintain conditions of order necessary to those tasks). "Both these tasks require a specific expertise, ... there are always problems of teaching method ... so teachers require a special expertise, whatever their role."⁹

If knowledge (of content to be transmitted) and expertise (about methods of transmission) are the educationally necessary domains of *de facto* authority, and if this *de facto* authority is held to justify the *de jure* authority of the teacher as rationally grounded, an obvious necessary condition needs to be satisfied: it must be the case that the knowledge/expertise possessed, is of the relevant type. It must be the case that what the teacher is an authority on, is that which he is to transmit to others. Failure to conform to this essential condition entails the promotion of arbitrariness in authority-ascription, which is to transform educational authority into institutional power.

Since the second part of the teacher's 'dual role' - as the agent of social control authorized *de jure* to "train people for some occupations, and to act as an agent of selection ..." is made conditional on the first part of that role (the transmission of knowledge), discussion here is confined to determining the legitimacy of ascribing *epistemic* authority to teachers. It is often contended that those who criticize the teachers' authority, confuse 'authority' (legitimate power) with 'authoritarianism' (illegitimate and in that sense arbitrary power). That thesis is further supported by claiming that 'authority' is a conceptual implication of the teaching/learning interaction. If A wishes to learn x from B, it is only rational, as Peters points out, that A accept B's teaching or having authority with respect to x. To pose questions about the legitimacy of ascribing epistemic authority to teachers is to ask whether the justification of the teachers' authority in (philosophical) theory, is applicable in justifying the teacher's authority in (institutional) practice, and to ask, therefore, whether what is authority in theory becomes authoritarianism in practice.

Of course, learning of the sort that Peters and other philosophers of education are concerned with must be 'educational' learning, not just any kind. Hence the content of what is taught, as well as the manner of teaching, needs to be further specified with reference to the concept of 'education'. The familiar response to the question of what knowledge is educationally appropriate, is framed by reference to characteristic forms of knowledge expressive of the various ways in which persons have shaped, organized and rendered meaningful, their experience over the centuries. Thus a particular conception of knowledge appears at the nexus of teaching and learning, as a grounding for the authority which mediates that relation. What is at issue, then, is the relation of that theoretical

conception of educational knowledge to concrete educational practice; there is a divergence, however, between the conception of knowledge that Peters' justification presupposes, and the conception of knowledge underpinning much actual school practice. This has significant implications for the legitimacy of teacher-authority.

In her article on "Classroom Knowledge", Nell Keddie summarizes teachers' perceptions thus:

The problem ... in teaching C pupils is that you cannot teach them subjects. When A pupils do subjects it can be assumed by teachers that they do what, in terms of the *subject*, is held to be appropriate, and material is prepared with regard to what is seen as the demands of the *subject*. In teaching C pupils, modifications must be made with regard to the pupil, and it is as though the subject is scanned for or reduced to residual 'human elements' or a 'series of stories'.¹⁰

Keddie draws attention to the consequences of differential treatment of subject-matter as effecting a class stratification of pupils, in terms of their educational achievements, and thus as a process whereby a particular normative order is maintained. A different, though quite probably related use can be made of her observations, by pointing to the authoritarian consequences of differential curricular provision as explanatory at least in part, of forms of active or passive resistance to learning, and varieties of social disruption within school communities.

A standard approach to curriculum modification, Keddie observes, presupposes that "the range of understanding that is available to C stream pupils must be rooted in their 'experience'," and she reports teachers' statements which exemplify this. For instance, (on the subject of the British economy)

I can streamline it as it's got various grades of content and I can, I hope, do things which are very useful and valuable to a C child which I don't feel are as necessary for the A child. But they're all doing economics, they're all doing certain vital basic studies in how the economy works ... that leads on to a special study of labour for the C's. Rewards for labour-wages. Wages can then be considered for girls in terms of why they're paid often lower than men's pay, and what sorts of factors determine the different wage rates for different sorts of employment - something that's very immediate for these children.¹¹

It is important to mention the fact that in *practice*, the teacher whose epistemic authority derives from his knowledge of the discipline of physics, often finds himself exercising authority (but not *that* authority) in Social Studies 10, or English 11. Hence it is misconceived to argue that the transfer of authority which the teacher holds virtue of his/her 'expertise'¹² with respect to methods and the technical 'know how' of teaching, is sufficient to justify the teachers' authority across disciplines. The sort of technical know how which *can* transfer across disciplines, turns out on closer examination, to be related to social (classroom/institutional) control, rather than the teaching or learning of educational knowledge. Insofar as expertise *does* relate to the transmission of knowledge, the methods and means of teaching are not separable from the content and ends - as Peters, presumably, would be the first to agree. The supposition of transfer, then cannot constitute a valid counter-argument to this thesis, since, if it is proposed as such, it presupposes a relation of independence between how to teach a subject, and what the subject is which is to be taught. On Peters' own analysis, then, there is no alternative, for the legitimate grounding of educational authority, but to satisfy the following conditions: (1) the teachers' knowledge must be *superior* to that possessed by his student (2) that knowledge must be *educationally* worthwhile (3) that knowledge must constitute the *content* of what is taught. The practical implication, for administrators, is that to justify the teachers' authority or superior knowledge is possible if and only if the teacher is required to teach what he knows, and *only* what he knows. The practical implication for curriculum designers is that any modification of the curriculum for different groups of students, will promote the illegitimate use of authority if the selection of 'appropriate' content is made at the expense of failure to teach the *discipline* in question. What is absolutely crucial to recognize, is that authoritarianism, rather than authority, is promoted in schools if these principles are not adhered to in practice.

Only by means of an extensive critical analysis of curricular (and especially, "modified" curricular) materials, could the empirical contention be sustained that such content fails to satisfy necessary conditions of educational knowledge. That task is not attempted here: the concern, rather, is to draw attention to a continuum of knowledge, with "knowledge at the forefront of the discipline", at one extreme and "modified curricular knowledge" at the other.

We can trace in terms of an embarrassingly declining scale, the degree of similarity of the knowledge of physicists, at the frontiers of their science, from that of their university professor products, and again from the university professor's knowledge of physics, to the Physics 100 student, who becomes an elementary school teacher and is taught in his training course how to 'curricularize' physics for the fourth form, which is further differentiated for his 'A' and his 'C' streams. It is crucial to keep in mind that these are not diminishing degrees of knowledge of physics, the science. Rather, the situation is one of diminishing degrees of knowledge of a variety of forms of inquiry all called 'physics', and referring to the same generic kind of phenomenon, at the most basic level (i.e. in terms of final referent, not in terms of frequency of reference within the work. Physicists clearly refer rather more often to neutrinos and quarks than to the pendulums and flashlights of IV-C who, some would have us believe, are still 'doing physics'.).

The time has come, surely, for a little common sense. Teachers of IV-C may be trying to teach physics, or may be doing whatever it is they're doing with the *intention* that their students will (eventually) learn "physics", but they may not be imparting knowledge which significantly resembles, either in substance or method, the science of physics.

It would be helpful of course, to have a detailed specification of points along that continuum. It is not essential, however, to the point at issue here. What must be recognized is that Peters' analysis presupposes a *convergence* between what the teacher knows, and what he teaches. Investigations such as Keddie's into curricular knowledge, however, illustrate that this convergence is highly problematic, particularly where knowledge is 'streamed' for different groups of learners. The problem is not restricted to the school context however.

For those of us who work with university students, how many of us are actually teaching something in which we are authorities, as opposed to teaching something we feel might eventually come to resemble what we are knowledgeable about? (And here I do not refer merely to that great tradition of teaching social issues when one has been hired as a philosopher?) And how many of us, therefore, are actually in a position, like Mead, Dewey, Freud, and those others who taught in a similar fashion, but whose ideas were not of quite that stature, to present our lecture notes as representative of and expressive of our thinking within our own field of competence? In the present state of the art, often lectures are one thing, and research and publications quite another.

Philosophical Analysis and Sociological Explanation

Why is it that the 'A' stream is so 'well-behaved' and the 'C' stream so resistant and undisciplined? Sociological and psychological explanations of diminishing classroom order, and the consequent practical need for increasing authoritarian (non-rationally grounded) control, have offered hypotheses in terms of class, culture, and cognitive, emotional and motivational factors. In so doing, they have failed to render problematic the legitimacy of the authority system in educational institutions. Using Peters' analysis of authority, in conjunction with a sociological account of different forms of curricular knowledge, we can offer a philosophical hypothesis admitting of empirical testing. It is this: that student challenges to authority are paradigmatically legitimate, i.e., that the continuum of such challenges parallels the continuum of the legitimacy of the teachers epistemic authority.

This provides *an* explanation, at the very least, of why it is that 'the legitimate domain of the teachers' authority' constitutes the topic of one of the very first school-child excursions into philosophical reasoning. And presumably, it provides an explanation of the relative frequency of student challenges to teacher-authority from C-stream, as against A-stream students. Could it not also constitute an explanation of certain forms of discontent among university students in contemporary undergraduate training grounds? The reason that, for example, Wittgenstein's students never rose in rebellion against his determining the content of their philosophy lectures may be a function, not of the conservative character of Cambridge undergraduates of that day, nor Wittgenstein's own exceptional brilliance (though both factors may undoubtedly have contributed), but rather the fact that - before the era of Phil 001 - the content of Wittgenstein's lectures were *not* watered down versions of semi-

digested pellets of other philosophers' writings, organized in terms of difficulty -- but were his own, ongoing attempt to solve the problems he had set himself.

Clearly, it *is* legitimate to ascribe ('objective') epistemic authority where students do not as yet ('subjectively') perceive grounds, and thus the legitimacy, of that authority. The thesis here is *not* that resistance and refusal is justified simply because the reasons for authority ascription are not evident to students; for coming to see those reasons is part of the process of acquiring knowledge from an authority and cannot therefore be a necessary condition of it. There is an important question to be asked, however, about the relation between objective grounds for authority ascription, and subjective perception of those grounds, for it is only in the (ideal) situation of convergence between these two factors, that the acceptance of epistemic authority is fully rational. This situation serves, then, as a regulative principle, to which degrees 'rational expectation' of such perception increasingly approximate.

To illustrate: in the very early years of schooling, epistemic considerations play a very insignificant part in the students' recognition and acceptance of authority. Ideally, as the learner expands his knowledge, interchange between teacher and learner is based more on rational, and less on emotional considerations and institutional power relations. The aim of developing informed rational autonomous persons entails that what the learner accepts as true comes to be increasingly grounded in 'good reasons' for such acceptance as true. But as Hirst¹³ pointed out, the criteria for the truth of propositions vary with the kind of proposition asserted, so that a progressive understanding of the discipline itself is the necessary condition of an increasingly rational acceptance of educational authority. All too obviously, then, students who are not taught the discipline (which provides such criteria) are denied access to the means of rational autonomous development. The rational acceptance 'on authority' of teacher-pronouncements concerning the truth of propositions, where the student has not yet learned the discipline, is possible only if (a) the teacher *knows* the discipline and (b) *teaches* the discipline.

For any group of students whose 'modified' curriculum embodies an emasculated version of the teachers disciplinary knowledge, the fact that the teacher is 'an authority' on the discipline, does not justify his being an authority for *them* (although it does for the 'A' stream). To select from economics, for example, the 'human interest stories', the practical guides to family finances, the ideological justification for differential wages, and so on, is to deny to students any possibility of critically accepting what the teacher teaches. Cognitively, it results in denying the student the necessary means of understanding what is taught. Emotionally (though this is speculative) it may build up, in consequence of a series of *intellectual* frustrations, a resistance to accepting the discipline as of any value or importance. There is thus some legitimacy in fact for the episode reported by Keddie. She writes,

... I have asked this teacher whether any pupil had asked in class, ... 'Why should we do social science?' and had the reply:

Teacher: No, but if I were asked by C's I would try to sidestep it because it would be the same question as 'Why do anything? Why work?'

Observer: What if you were asked by an A group?

Teacher: Then I'd probably try to answer.¹⁴

But if 'C' pupils take this attitude, it is surely plausibly explained as the result of a veridical perception of irrelevance, stemming from a historically developed rational expectation that no justification will be given, either for the propositions asserted within the discipline, or for the value of the discipline itself. 'A' pupils, as Keddie observes, are granted access to teachers' definitions of subject matter; 'C' pupils are not. Is it surprising, or in any way unreasonable, that they come, after a time, to reject such definitions? The fact that 'A' pupils, as Keddie notes, are much more willing to take over teacher's definitions 'on trust', is clearly rationally based. It is based on rational expectations that the *grounds* for the teachers epistemic authority will become apparent by them at some future time. Keddie writes, "It may be that the important thing for A pupils is the belief that the knowledge is structured and the material they are asked to work with has sufficient closure to make 'finding the

answer' possible. They are usually willing to work within the framework outlined by the teacher, and within his terms."¹⁵ To expect the same willingness from 'C' pupils, is to set different standards of acceptable behaviour for different groups of students: for the 'A' students, standards of criticism, rationality and autonomy, and for the 'C' students, standards of passivity, irrationality, and dependence. To say this is of course to suggest that the aims of education for the 'A' stream are different from the aims of education for the 'C' stream.

Failure to recognize this crucial implication of the 'modified' curriculum which follows the trends studied by Keddie, results at the level of theory, in massive educational inequality, and correspondingly, in practical problems of behaviour and achievement which are central concerns of the classroom teacher.

The demand by many sociologists that philosophers recognize their error in perceiving as 'authority' that which is in fact 'power' in education, can thus be seen to be grounded in certain contrafactual assumptions within the philosophical analysis of educational authority. Failure to meet the necessary condition of relevance between the grounds of the teachers authority and the content of what is taught, is seen to stem from (1) the failure to appreciate that expertise in teaching is subject-specific, and as such cannot satisfy the relevance condition on its own, and (2) the critical assumption of an identity of type between curricular and disciplinary knowledge. The implications of disregarding these considerations in justifying submission to the teachers' authority are (1) to legitimate coercive power in the name of authority and (2) to sanction the acceptance of contradictory sets of educational aims for students seen to differ in ability.

Notes

- ¹ R.S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966).
- ² N. Keddie, "Classroom Knowledge", in M.F.D. Young (ed.), *Knowledge and Control* (London: Collier MacMillan, 1971).
- ³ Peters, pp. 237-265.
- ⁴ Peters, p. 250.
- ⁵ Peters, p. 245.
- ⁶ Peters, p. 240.
- ⁷ Peters, p. 251.
- ⁸ Peters, p. 251.
- ⁹ Peters, pp. 252-53.
- ¹⁰ Keddie, p. 148.
- ¹¹ Keddie, p. 148.
- ¹² Peters, pp. 252-53.
- ¹³ Paul Hirst, "Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge" in *Knowledge and the Curriculum* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974).
- ¹⁴ Keddie, p. 140.
- ¹⁵ Keddie, p. 152.