

Some Dilemmas of Teacher Authority

Nicholas C. Burbules

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

This disagreement illustrates the importance of asking, “What is the question?” Randall Curren’s questions are, on the whole, not my questions. I do not intend to challenge his questions here, but by the same token I do not want my questions assimilated into his. His question is when teacher authority justifies “imposing things” on students — including “the authority of educators to threaten or use force.” I am willing to concede at the outset that in limiting cases (for example, to prevent serious harm to them or to others) “imposing things” without student consent is an aspect of legitimate teacher authority, as it is sometimes an aspect of good parenting. Furthermore, I concede that in a general sense the institutional roles and responsibilities of teachers, granted to them (and sometimes imposed upon them) by parents and society generally, can legitimate such exercises of teacher authority. But I think it is misleading to take those instances where teachers, “as a last resort,” may be reduced to threatening or using force, as emblematic of teacher authority generally.

My question, in the book chapter Curren discusses, is a concern with the *dilemmas* of teacher authority. In this response I want to apply that style of analysis to the claims I have just conceded. My general approach is not to frame questions such as “Is teacher authority a good or bad thing?” but rather, “Given the necessity of teacher authority, what dilemmas are inherent to it, even when, *or especially when*, it may be legitimate?”

First, developmental issues. Curren is quite right that I do not give them sufficient attention in the chapter he discusses. He says that very young children “are simply not ready to be internally self-regulating,” and so we must make decisions for them. But the problem (the educational problem) is that sometimes, and in some domains, they are ready to be self-regulating and in others they are not. Dichotomous characterizations, like Diana Baumrind’s, which Curren relies upon, between “permissive” and “authoritative” approaches, obscure all the real issues. I am not arguing, and do not see how anyone could, that teacher (or parental) authority must always seek explicit consent or approval.¹ Let’s set that foolish notion aside.

Now the difficult questions. Curren wants to emphasize the issue of very young children’s “competence to decide,” asking when they are “fully fledged” to choose for themselves. What kind of threshold is being sought here? When the notion of authority is viewed in terms of a threshold, and when it is justified in terms of making decisions for children’s own good because they are not ready to make such decisions themselves, what will constitute their being “full-fledged autonomous agents”?² There is always a temptation to make and enforce decisions on behalf of the young, in the name of what one thinks is in their best interests. Where does this end? Curren, as I read him, takes the case of very young children, and extends this reasoning *upward*; I would rather ask the question of how far *downward* we can extend the respect we accord to “full-fledged autonomous agents.”³

So here is the first dilemma: When does the need for teacher authority *end*? Can this be answered in terms of some threshold of competency that children pass, or is it *at every stage* a process of judgment and balance? I want to change the question of “when are kids ready for autonomy” into “how do we help them grow in autonomy” (which requires respecting the degree of autonomy that they already have). I believe that there are all sorts of complex and contradictory choices here — choices that analyses like Laura Purdy’s, as it is invoked in Curren’s paper, do not help us with very much.

I am a fan of that old saying, “Begin as you plan to continue.” Given several acknowledged dilemmas, I would rather risk defining competency downward than defining incompetency upward — otherwise students may never be judged “fully fledged.” When, instead, are they *sufficiently fledged*? The tough issue here is that learning to make choices for one’s self includes the risk — indeed, the *necessity* — of making some bad choices and coping with the consequences. Of course authority sometimes requires stepping in to prevent catastrophically bad decisions. But teaching in such a way that is intended to make its own authority eventually superfluous must err, it seems to me, on the side of respect and trust. The risk of assuming competence among students who are not ready must be balanced against the recognition that sometimes, when maturity and thoughtfulness are expected from the young, they rise to the occasion of fulfilling those expectations.

Here, then, is the second dilemma, “How does the exercise of authority in teaching conflict with the educational aim of undermining the need for teacher authority?” In practice, and at nearly every age, there is a conflict between imposing or forcing certain educational requirements and respecting the fact, indeed the inevitability, that students will make choices for themselves and that even in the face of teacher imposition student recalcitrance can make such requirements meaningless. A respected child development specialist⁴ put this perfectly as we were discussing this problem: Curren seems to think the basic problem is “getting young people to do what you want them to do,” when a better way to think of it is “getting young people to *want* to do what you want them to want to do.”

This discussion also points out the difficulties of the “last resort” condition for the use of “compelling means.” In a broad way I understand what is meant here, but how exactly does one make this judgment? Does last resort mean “I personally can’t think of any better alternative at this moment”? There are temptations and traps in the exercise of any authority that presumes to know best; temptations that can make it all too easy to see the legitimate exercise of authority in more and more cases (even those which have more to do with personal convenience than with student interests). I mean, let’s be honest here.

And then there is a third dilemma: “How do society’s expectations of teachers, instantiated in institutional roles and responsibilities, conflict with their actually being good teachers?” Curren notes the role of caretaking *in loco parentis*, which sets certain expectations of what teachers ought to do in managing classrooms and governing schools as holding tanks for young people several hours a day. These activities of nonconsensual management and governing — policing, if you will —

sometimes relate to and are necessary for teaching to proceed (teachers can't have kids screaming and running around the classroom all day). But they often exceed what is necessary for good teaching, and sometimes even conflict with what is necessary for good teaching. Framing the question in terms of teachers' "right to govern their classroom" (regardless of what the kids want), a right authorized by parental/societal legitimation, brings in a number of other aspects of authority that parents and society might want teachers to exercise, which exceed or conflict with their responsibilities *as teachers*.⁵ What then?

I can only speak briefly about Curren's two cases, which I think exemplify these sorts of dilemmas and paradoxes much more clearly than he does. In the first case, his question is what justifies the teacher in such acts as ordering the removal of the violent or agitated student from school, requiring that he see a school counselor against his will, or even as a last resort calling in the "school disciplinarian" (which may entail the threat or use of force)? My question would be, what are the risks that these very actions might reinforce and exacerbate the sense of resentment and alienation the student feels, actually precipitating a Columbine-type attack?

In the second case, his question is, what happens when an inexperienced teacher does not take charge of a classroom where students clearly expect a higher level of discipline, including corporal punishment, than he feels comfortable with? My question would be, where do these student expectations come from, and what duties does the teacher have to question them explicitly and to help students to question them?

And so, my final dilemma: If teacher authority should be in some sense self-undermining, what does this say about *how* such authority should be exercised, when it should *not be* exercised (even if it *can be*), and when it should be exercised only in order to encourage and welcome students questioning it? How does a teacher foster this critical and questioning attitude in students, even as he or she is exercising authority? Curren does not seem to be interested in exploring such dilemmas. I am.

In closing, I want to say that Curren's highlighting of developmental concerns, and his distinction between three aspects of teacher authority (what right to authority is authorized by societal or parental legitimation; what is morally appropriate in the manner in which one exercises authority; and what is practically efficacious in dealing from a position of authority *vis á vis* students), do help advance the discussion of teacher authority. But I believe that they advance it primarily by highlighting and sharpening the paradoxes of teacher authority — particularly in how the three aspects of authority Curren describes can come into fundamental conflict. All of this seems to support a much greater modesty and ambivalence in the assumption of authority by teachers. But, again, those are my questions, not his.⁶

1. There is a deeper philosophical difference at work here, I suspect, between an "objectivist" account of authority, which presumably exists whether anyone recognizes it or not, and a "relational" view, grounded in recognition and reciprocity. But that large issue goes beyond what I can manage in this short response.

2. I know adults who wouldn't qualify by this standard.

3. I think the work of Vivian Gussin Paley illustrates that even very young children can be astute judges of moral or intellectual problems when they are given a chance to do so: see, for example, Vivian Gussin Paley, *You Can't Say You Can't Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) and *Wally's Stories: Conversations in the Kindergarten* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

4. My wife, Joyce Atkinson.

5. In California in 1994, Proposition 187 was passed requiring teachers to report the children of illegal aliens they discovered in their classes. This was, then, part of their legal authority (indeed, it was mandatory). Was it compatible with their role *as teachers*? Clearly not.

6. Thanks again to Joyce Atkinson and to Philip Zoghates for helpful conversations as I was thinking about this response.