

The Concept of Authority and the Swedish Educational Crisis

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In 1958, Hannah Arendt published “The Crisis in Education”¹ addressing what she considered to be the poor state of contemporary American education. While the causes of this educational crisis were identified as being part of much broader processes of social and political change, education stood out as the social arena where the effects of these transformations were most obvious. The lack of authority in modern societies, in particular, was one of the most manifest symptoms of the crisis in education.. Arendt claimed that this lack of authority eroded the fundamental relation between teacher and student and the mutual trust necessary for safeguarding the social position of the teacher. In this paper, we aim to use Arendt’s concept of authority in order to diagnose a current crisis in Swedish education, and to argue that this may help us understand the role of the teacher from a perspective that is missing in the current debate on Swedish education.

The Swedish Crisis in Education

Over the past fifteen years there has been a considerable decline in the test results of Swedish 15-year-old students as measured by the OECD’s PISA evaluations. Notwithstanding the flaws of such evaluations,² these results have given rise to a heated political debate concerning the possible causes and remedies of what has been referred to as a growing crisis in Swedish education. This growing crisis, also known as “PISA-shock”,³ has been accentuated by the fact that it clashes with a deeply rooted national idea of Sweden “as an ideal for school development in western countries.”⁴ In fact, the OECD’s Director responsible for PISA, Andreas Schleicher, recently stressed that “across the world, Sweden was once seen by many as a model for high quality education, and it possesses many of the ingredients to become that again.”⁵

The public debate about the current crisis in Swedish education has centered around divergent views on how to best organize education so as to reinstate the Swedish educational system as a model of effective learning and a guarantor of social equality. Despite these divergent views, there is agreement on what the problems are: decreasing student performance and increasing inequality between schools. With regard to the

suggested solutions, however, two very different images emerge. These images are conceptualized as incompatible positions related to the age-old division between educational “progressivists” and educational “traditionalists.”⁶

It becomes clear from this debate that there is more at stake here than the actual results of Swedish students in skills such as reading and mathematics. Rather, it indicates a more thoroughgoing crisis in the public view of what education is fundamentally about or what it ought to be about. As such, the debate in Sweden may be conceived as part of an international and historical debate on the purpose of education. In this sense, we may approach the crisis in Swedish education in a way similar to how Hannah Arendt addressed the crisis in education in the United States in the 1950s. She wrote:

Certainly, more is involved here than the puzzling question of why Johnny can't read. Moreover, there is always a temptation to believe that we are dealing with specific problems confined within historical and national boundaries of importance only to those immediately affected.⁷

Arendt perceived the problem of education to be part of a greater crisis in modern politics, in which the concepts of authority and tradition no longer provided the foundation they once did. Consequently, Arendt established that “[t]he problem of education in the modern world lies in the fact that by its very nature it cannot forego either authority or tradition, and yet must proceed in a world that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition.”⁸

The notion of Swedish education as an international ideal stems in part from the central role given to education within the construction of the post-world war Swedish welfare state, when traditional conservative ideals gave way to progressive values such as democracy, social justice, and equality. In this context, education became a key political instrument for eradicating social inequalities and dismantling traditional hierarchical structures. More specifically, this involved a turn towards student-centered education and collective learning focused on the internal motivation of students, and away from standardized teaching that emphasized individual learning. Thus, the traditional roles of teacher and student were blurred.⁹ In the construction of this new and equal society, values such as authority and tradition became associated with the inequalities of the class structures of the past. The eradication of class differences was to be achieved by way of a

centralized bureaucratic system capable of delivering an equal education that could compensate for social differences among students. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, this bureaucratic model faced criticism due to its inherent rigidity, which made the educational system insensitive to local needs and thereby hindering democratic participation. It was also ineffective, expensive, and hard to govern.¹⁰ During this period, the rise of New Public Management emerged on to the international political arena as an unexpected solution to these perceived difficulties. Even if it seemed to be a far cry from the Swedish social democratic model, the NPM-model offered a way by which the public sector could be efficiently decentralized. In addition, the introduction of choice and of private actors into welfare provision was perceived to increase the level of citizen participation. In the context of education, this meant a historic shift from a highly centralized and regulated system to one of the most deregulated educational systems in the world.¹¹

In the wake of processes of marketization of education, measurements such as the OECD's PISA evaluations have become influential markers of success in the global educational market. In this context, the decreasing test results of Swedish students during the 2000s became a political problem. One of the deficiencies of Swedish education, highlighted by the OECD, concerned a lack of discipline among Swedish students, in various forms, such as high levels of absenteeism.¹² This was used by the then Swedish Minister of Education as an argument for the need to restart a political discussion about the need for increased discipline and the promotion of individualised learning in schools. In this way, the Minister challenged some of the core values of the progressive foundation and methods of Swedish education, and reignited the conflict between "progressivists" and "traditionalists" in the public debate.

Arendt's Concept of Authority and Teaching

The attention paid to improving discipline in schools can be seen as an attempt to reinstate the traditional authority of the teacher and the clear-cut roles of teacher and student that were dismantled during the heyday of Swedish progressive education. This brings us back to the question of what authority is and how it relates to education in general. In her 1954 essay "What is Authority?," Arendt begins by establishing what authority has come to be associated with, namely, force and coercion on the one hand, and persuasion and argumentation on the other. But this is not what authority is. Proper authority, Arendt claims, rests with common notions grounded in a foundational structure, such as "[t]he

word of God, the law of nature, or Platonic ideals.”¹³ In a world deprived of these foundational structures, there is nothing tangible to hinge authority on, leaving teachers (and other authoritative figures) with few options other than to establish their necessary authority through either coercion or persuasion. But this is not authority, Arendt claims: “authority precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority itself has failed.”¹⁴ Obedience enforced through violence is not dependent upon “a force external and superior to its own power ... against which [its] power can be checked,”¹⁵ thus making it into a form of tyranny. Whereas “the tyrant rules in accordance with his own will and interest,”¹⁶ the authoritarian ruler is always bound by a force external to him- or herself. On the other hand, the problem with establishing authority by way of persuasion is that persuasion “presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation.”¹⁷ This can never lend itself as a model for an authoritarian relation since such a relation is hinged upon an incontestable hierarchical order legitimized and recognized by “the one who commands” as well as “the one who obeys”, and in which they “both have their predetermined stable place.”¹⁸ Olivier Michaud sums up Arendt’s understanding of authority well:

For Arendt, authority is the power that exists outside of violence and argumentation. It takes its force from two sources: on the one hand, individuals must freely recognize it as legitimate; and, on the other hand, it points toward something superior from which it receives its legitimacy (for example, God or tradition).¹⁹

Taking a cue from Arendt’s concerns about the disappearance of true authority from the modern world and her contention that education provides the most obvious example of the deleterious effects of this unfortunate development, it is necessary to investigate, in more detail, the relationship between authority and teaching. Traditionally, teaching and authority are bound together in the sense that the role of the teacher is conditioned by his or her recognized authority “as a trained expert and representative of the community.”²⁰ In this context, it is important to note that the authority of the teacher traditionally rests upon the trust of the community, which appoints the teacher as a custodian of its foundational traditions and beliefs. The role of authority in this sense is “essentially positive and constructive rather than negative and limiting.”²¹ This, of course, presupposes the

homogeneity of the community and its culture. In a diverse community that represents many different traditions and systems of belief, it will be considerably more difficult to posit a unanimous foundation from which to derive authority. Nevertheless, recent contributions to the debate stress the necessity of reinstating the authority of the teacher within a pluralistic democratic framework.²²

Arguing that Arendt's concept of authority offers a viable basis for democratic education, Gordon takes care to distinguish her notions from what he calls the mainstream conservative view of education. This view has been criticized for the tendency to foster "students who are passive, disciplined, and content rather than ones that can question, doubt, and think for themselves."²³ In contrast to this view, Gordon argues that Arendt's brand of conservatism avoids the pitfalls of this criticism by advocating a conception of authority that aims toward the emancipation of students. Two important aspects, however, condition this process of emancipation:

First is the idea that the democratic aim of enhancing children's creativity and initiative cannot be achieved unless teachers instruct the young about the cultural traditions of the past. The reason is that it is impossible to critique, change, and renew the world without being thoroughly familiar with it first... Likewise, creativity and innovation are truly significant only in relation to the world that came before them.²⁴

For Arendt, in other words, it makes no sense to preserve the past for the sake of tradition itself. Instead, tradition functions as the necessary point of departure for thinking the world anew. This requires that the teacher assumes responsibility for introducing the student to the world as it is (and its traditions) while at the same time taking care to cultivate the student's potential to renew the world. Drawing from different philosophical sources, Kitchen reaches similar conclusions:

to view the teacher as *an* authority and *in* authority in his or her classroom need not give rise to the view that education is a "top-down," coercive and restrictive process; rather, the teacher is viewed as the master expert who guides the pupils with whom he or she has been charged towards intellectual emancipation.²⁵

One of the greatest obstacles of the endeavor to reinstate authority within the bounds of modern democratic education may be perceived to be the anti-authoritarianism of the influential movement of progressive education. According to Mintz: “[t]he early principles of the progressive movement in education included broadening the curriculum, aligning it to the needs of diverse students, and using schooling to democratize society.”²⁶ One of the major strategies for democratizing schools was the move from teacher- and subject-centered education to student-centered education. This, in turn, demanded the democratization of the very relation between teacher and student, eroding the hierarchical structure necessary for upholding authority (in the Arendtian sense).

While the deconstruction of such a hierarchical order may be considered desirable from the point of view of a larger project of educational democratization, it may also, however, have some undesirable and unexpected effects with regard to the roles of teacher and student. A teacher deprived of his/her natural claim to authority is left either to try to reclaim authority by means of coercion and force, or to abandon authority altogether in favor of constant negotiations over the means and ends of education, where all parties involved (students, parents, politicians, etc.) have an equal say in the matter. In the absence of recognized authority, a polyphony of opinions struggle over the right to define what education is and what it should be about. In this context, the role of the teacher becomes that of the mediator, left with the unrewarding task of trying to satisfy a number of different (and sometimes incompatible) needs and desires simultaneously. It may be argued that such developments (strengthened by the marketization of education) have helped shape a common view of the teacher as self-sacrificing and incompetent when left to his/her own devices. As Higgins has argued, the notion of the teacher as, above all, an altruistic provider of services makes for a “weak” concept in so far as teaching is then reduced to a “helping profession” that is “unsustainable and ultimately undesirable because it tends to collapse into asceticism and lead to ‘teacher burnout’.”²⁷ In the context of educational marketization, another unfortunate effect of conceiving education as a service to be provided is the commodification of education. The progressive ideal of student-centeredness lends itself well to the logic of a consumer-oriented educational model, currently championed by influential international organizations such as the OECD.

The student as consumer stands out as another unfortunate effect of the erosion of teacher authority. The problem inherent in the consumer-model is that a customer, by definition, seeks out a given service or product in order to satisfy an already identified need

or desire with a certain preconceived solution in mind. If you are in the market for a new house, for instance, you have a certain conception of what a house should look like in order to correspond with your expectations. You may have a certain number of bedrooms in mind, or a certain garden size, etc. The point is, we judge the appropriateness of the object of our desires in relation to our preconceived ideals in order to make an informed decision. In education, however, the very notion that we already know what we want or desire is at odds with the image of education as an introduction into a world not yet fully known to the student. As a student, I do not know what I need, which in turn is the reason for why I need to be educated in the first place. For this reason, education is partly about overcoming temporary desires so as to be able to assume responsibility for our common world. Mintz argues that contemporary education suffers from a “widely held belief that frustration, confusion, distress, and other painful moments in education inhibits learning,” and results in “contemporary classrooms in which students are denied meaningful challenges and deprived of important educational experiences.”²⁸ This problem seems to be an integral part of student-centered education to the extent that a focus on satisfying students’ expressed needs risks leading teachers to shy away from exposing students to difficult challenges, in order to guarantee “that they can feel successful and not be discouraged.”²⁹

One way of understanding this development is through the unexpected alignment of progressivist ideals (such as student-centered education) and educational marketization (exemplified by the student as consumer). While this appears unexpected – in the sense that progressivists tend to view education as a vehicle for political transformation rather than an instrument of economic interests or market ideologies – there is a sense in which the focus on students’ influence, within both of these tendencies, benefits from the erosion of traditional authority. From the perspective of liberal economics, this accords well with the notion of free choice in the marketplace. From the perspective of progressive education it serves the ideal of the school as an arena for practicing democracy, equality, and the autonomy of the individual freed from the constraints of tradition.

In Sweden, the close connection between student-centered education and the influence of a liberal economic logic within education is evident, for example, in the rise of government-sponsored educational programs such as “entrepreneurial learning.” Entrepreneurial learning emerges as a fusion of traditional progressive values, such as social responsibility, student-centeredness, creativity, and internal motivation, with a logic that transforms such values into assets for creating business-minded and competitive

students capable of “utilizing opportunities and changes as well as developing and creating values – personal, cultural, social or economic.”³⁰ While this model has succeeded in combining the values of progressive education with the interests of educational marketization, it has not, however, yielded the anticipated improvement in academic results, as is evident in the Swedish PISA results of the 2000s. What is lacking from both of these accounts of education is a robust concept of authority. As indicated above, progressive education and market ideologies both profit from the dismantling of traditional social hierarchies so as to be able to put the desires of the student/consumer - rather than the teacher’s responsibility for the continuation of the world - at the center of the educational enterprise.

The fact that these new models of progressive education – such as programs for entrepreneurial learning – have proved unsuccessful in international tests, combined with the highlighted lack of discipline among Swedish students, has resulted in a political demand for the reinstatement of traditional schooling. Traditional schooling, in this context, was interpreted as stricter classroom discipline (including strictly enforced codes of conduct) and a renewed focus on teacher- and subject-centered teaching and individual learning. As many of the suggestions hinged on the introduction of various disciplinary sanctions, this could be interpreted as a tacit appeal to the kind of mainstream conservative view discussed by Gordon above. The problem with this, as argued by Rosenow, is that disciplinary sanctions “are not an educational means but an administrative device.”³¹ This places the teacher in a “vicious circle which forces him or her to exercise authority in a way which corrodes the very rationale of this authority and ultimately brings about its collapse.”³² As we have seen, authority – in an Arendtian sense – is incompatible with coercion by force, as it renders the teacher not so much as a natural authority to be respected and emulated, but a government official to be obeyed without question.

Final Thoughts

Against the background of this brief discussion, it appears that the current crisis in Swedish education, manifested in declining results in the PISA evaluations, cannot be resolved by clinging ever tighter to the progressive ideal of student-centered education or by appealing to the need for increased classroom discipline and a mainstream conservative view of knowledge transmission. Student-centered education is problematic, as it inevitably leads to an educational system propelled by persuasion and negotiation resulting from the lack of

a clear hierarchical structure. Student-centered education presupposes an equal relationship between teacher and student, when the very notion of education, arguably, rests on the distinction between these two different roles. The mainstream conservative view, on the other hand, falls prey to the fallacy of enforcing teacher authority through coercion, which as Arendt points out, cancels out the very idea of authority itself. As such, the need for coercion is a symptom of the absence of authority rather than a means by which to instate it.

Using an Arendtian framework to diagnose the Swedish crisis in education, indicates that – much like in the United States in the 1950s – we are concerned with a more general crisis of authority. Consequently, the task ahead is to establish a viable concept of authority for a pluralistic democratic society, in relation to which the roles of teacher and student can become meaningful and be conceived as integral parts of a common educational project. Such a project needs to be founded on the teacher's ability to present the world as it is, so that students can form knowledge about this world in order to be able to change it. This, of course, presupposes a bond of trust between teacher and student based on society's trust in the teacher as its appointed representative. Also, such trust needs to be founded on some kind of shared set of beliefs, aimed at the continuation of a democratic community rather than some kind of *laissez-faire* individualism manifested in the image of the student as a consumer in an educational market. It is important to note, however, that schools are not democratic in themselves. The teacher cannot simply be understood as one of many equal voices in the classroom. Instead, the teacher must be granted full authority to introduce the student to the world as it is without being forced to succumb to either strategies of coercion or negotiations.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to answer the question of what a viable concept of authority in a pluralistic democratic society such as Sweden might be, it is nevertheless clear that Arendt's concept of authority offers a possible explanation of why progressive education, as well as more traditionally conservative views on education, fail to construct a viable notion of the role of the teacher. Paradoxically, the importance of restoring the social status of the teacher is a recurring argument in the debates about how to salvage the failing educational system. In the light of this, Arendt can help us to see that the problem of the social status of the teacher cannot be solved instrumentally by increasing the disciplinary power of teachers, but must be addressed as a more foundational problem concerning the basis of authority in a pluralistic society.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

² In an open letter to PISA director Andreas Schleicher in the Guardian (6 May 2014), a large number of prominent educational researchers from across the world voiced concern for the damaging effects of “measuring a great diversity of educational traditions and cultures using a single, narrow, biased yardstick.” <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/may/06/oecd-pisa-tests-damaging-education-academics>

³ Ingrid Carlgren, “Skolpolitikens heliga kor” [The Holy Cows of School Politics], *Skola och samhälle* (December 2013), <http://www.skolaochsamhalle.se/flode/skolpolitik/ingrid-carlgren-skolpolitikens-heliga-kor/>

⁴ Alfred Oftedal Telhaug, Odd Asbjørn Mediås, and Petter Aasen, “The Nordic Model in Education: Education as Part of the Political System in the Last 50 Years,” *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 50, no. 3 (2006): 245-283.

⁵ OECD, *Improving Schools in Sweden: An OECD Perspective* (2015)

<http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/Improving-Schools-in-Sweden.pdf#page29>.

⁶ This tension is described as follows in one of Sweden’s largest daily newspapers: “Throughout the 1900s the battle between “traditionalists” and “progressivists” has raged. To sum it up, the former believe that knowledge consists of measurable facts to be transferred from teacher to student using traditional methods, and the latter that knowledge is process based and needs to be put in relation to the student and the surrounding world – meaningfulness being a key word. The differences may also be described in terms of the conception of the student as a passive recipient or an active co-creator of knowledge.” Lotta Hardelin, “Därför tror skolforskare inte längre på disciplin” [Why Educational Researchers No Longer Believe in Discipline], *Dagens Nyheter*, December 19, 2014. Translation by authors.

⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 171.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁹ Oftedal Telhaug et al., “The Nordic Model in Education,” 254-255.

¹⁰ An important aspect necessary for understanding this development is the severe economic recession in Sweden in the early 1990s.

¹¹ Lisbeth Lundahl, “Sweden: Decentralization, Deregulation, Quasi-Markets – And then What?,” *Journal of Education Policy* 17, no. 6 (2002): 687-697. See also Ari Antikainen, “In Search of the Nordic Model in Education,” *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 50, no. 3 (2006): 229-243.

¹² Joakim Larsson, Annika Löfdahl, and Hector Pérez Prieto, “Rerouting: Discipline, Assessment, and Performativity in Contemporary Swedish Educational Discourse,” *Educational Inquiry* 1, no. 3 (2010): 177-195.

¹³ Anne O’Byrne, “Pedagogy Without a Project: Arendt and Derrida on Teaching, Responsibility and Revolution,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 24, no. 5 (2005): 389-409.

¹⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 92.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁹ Olivier Michaud, “Thinking about the Nature and Role of Authority in Democratic Education with Rousseau’s *Emile*,” *Educational Theory* 62, no. 3 (2012): 287-304.

²⁰ William H. Kitchen, *Authority and the Teacher* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 55.

²¹ Mordechai Gordon, “Hannah Arendt on Authority: Conservatism in Education Reconsidered,” *Educational Theory* 49, no. 2 (1999): 161-180, 163.

²² See, for example, Kitchen, *Authority and the Teacher*; Frank Furedi, *Wasted. Why Education Isn’t Educating* (London: Continuum, 2009); Gordon, “Hannah Arendt on Authority.” For a more detailed discussion on Arendt and the concept of democratic education, see Gert Biesta, “How to Exist Politically and Learn from It: Hannah Arendt and the Problem of Democratic Education,” *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 2 (2010): 556-575.

²³ Gordon, "Hannah Arendt on Authority," 174.

²⁴ Gordon, "Hannah Arendt on Authority," 175.

²⁵ Kitchen, *Authority and the Teacher*, 178.

²⁶ Avi I. Mintz, "The Happy and Suffering Student? Rousseau's *Emile* and the Path not taken in Progressive Educational Thought," *Educational Theory* 62, no. 3 (2012): 249-265, 249.

²⁷ Chris Higgins, "Teaching and the Good Life: A Critique of the Ascetic Ideal in Education," *Educational Theory* 53, no. 2 (2003): 131-154, 131.

²⁸ Mintz, "The Happy and Suffering Student?," 249-250.

²⁹ Mark E. Jonas, "When Teachers Must Let Education Hurt: Rousseau and Nietzsche on Compassion and the Educational Value of Suffering," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 44, no. 1 (2010): 45-60, 46.

³⁰ Skolverket [National Agency of Education], *Entreprenörskap i skolan* [Entrepreneurship in Schools] (2010) Translation by authors. <http://www.skolverket.se/publikationer?id=2456>

³¹ Eliyahy Rosenow, "Plato, Dewey, and the Problem of the Teacher's Authority," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 27, no. 2 (1993): 209-221, 219.

³² Rosenow, "Plato, Dewey, and the Problem of the Teacher's Authority," 219.