Aspects of Authority
– From Four Teachers’ Perspective

Aspekter på Auktoritetsbegreppet
- Ur ett Lärarperspektiv

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I would like to express my appreciation to the four teachers interviewed in this thesis. Their positive and friendly spirits made interviewing them bliss. They provided me with valuable insights and their openness towards me and willingness to participate is deeply appreciated.

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate how authority issues affect teachers in their perceptions of their daily work. It aims at exploring the complexity of authority as well as taking part of teachers’ experiences of authority in order to develop a greater understanding of how we best can work constructively with authority issues in the future. This is a crucial task for future teachers.

The thesis is based on qualitative interviews with four teachers with four teachers based in the same small town in the south of Sweden. I have analysed their answers and compared them and weighed them against what has been written on this topic.

This thesis highlights the importance of regarding teaching as a continually ongoing process.

Keywords: Authority, democracy, leadership and professional development
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1 Introduction

The decision to choose to investigate the concept of authority in my thesis is a product of a process that has taken place through my educational years. I have repeatedly found myself in situations where the issue has arisen. There have been situations where I have been forced to be very clear about my role as an authority in the classroom and there have been almost similar situations where no such clarity has been called for. Furthermore, I have had a constant inner dialogue where I have questioned the concept of authority as well as my right as a teacher to decide what kind of school climate is called for in a certain situation.

In an article published in *Sydsvenskan* 15th of April 2005, two authors, both deeply involved in school issues in Malmö, brought the issue up for discussion once again. They claimed that teachers seem to avoid being the authorities that they are, and in that they fail to create the order and peace in the classrooms that are crucial for a good learning environment. They also stated that the students already know, in many cases better than the teachers, that what is needed to stop the disorder is for the teachers to have the courage to be judgemental and not be afraid to raise their voices and “put their foot down”. In their report *Värdepedagogik i internationell belysning*, Gunnel Colnerud and Robert Thornberg add another aspect to the discussion on authority. They argue that it is particularly young teachers that struggle with their roles as authorities in the classrooms. The report claims that young teachers who wish to leave old roles of authority behind more often experience difficulties related to authority issues.

This thesis wants to investigate the following questions:

- What does it really mean for a teacher to be an authority?
- How do problems connected to teacher authority show themselves in a classroom?
- What are some of the causes of problems related to teacher authority and what solutions are there?

I partly find answers to these questions in the literature, in particular in texts discussing educational changes. But above all, I attempt to answer the above questions by interviewing
four experienced upper secondary teachers about their understanding of authority and how it relates to their teaching practice.
2 Background

Authority

When some means of power is used continuously and people are forced to do things or act against their beliefs, then consequences can be fatal. This is the conclusion of Dag Ingvar Jacobsen and Jan Thorsvik in their book *Hur moderna organisationer fungerar*, where they discuss power and authority. One consequence could lead to alienation which means that the person exposed to it “distanserar sig från organisationen och det arbete man ska utföra” (p. 210). The person then loses his motivation and tries to withdraw from the work presented to him. An efficient leadership “förutsätter att ledningens användning av makt uppfattas som riktig av dem som blir utsatt för den” (p. 210). When power is used in this way it is called legitimate power or authority, Jacobsen and Thorsvik state. According to Chester Barnard, authority is something that is given those in charge by those who are inferior and they are the source of all authority. Achieving authority is the most important thing a leader can strive for since this means that not every decision made is being questioned and that “inte alla beslut som det råder oenighet om möts av motstånd” (p. 210). Barnard states that any organisation where authority is involved is a network of “frivilliga kontrakt mellan en arbetsgivare och en arbetstagare” (p. 210). According to him, to achieve an organisation based on authority there has to be a balance between performance and reward. Barnard's concept of authority is built on a “frivilligt avtal mellan två likställda parter” (p. 211). This means that neither one of the participants is superior to the other. The situation is characterized by the fact that there is a balance between what you give and what you get in return, and both parts benefit from this relationship. It is crucial though that the conditions of the relationship have been clearly defined.

För Barnard var det centralt att sådana kontrakt – formella eller informella – innehöll en definition av gränser för vad en arbetsgivare kan förvänta sig av en arbetstagare. Så länge arbetsgivaren håller sig inom dessa gränser, uppfattar anställda order och riktlinjer som legitima. Försöker arbetsgivaren överskrida gränserna uppfattas det däremot som illegitimit och möter motstånd. (p. 211)
Skolpolitiskt program as discussed by Elevrådskongressen in 2005 makes it clear that our present school system is lacking in structure as well as in the setting of boundaries between the learning and the teaching levels, entities that Barnard regarded as crucial in his description of legitimate authority. Skolpolitiskt program asserts that in order to have a democratic society, the school system needs to be democratic. Elevrådskongressen stressed the importance of a more intense focus on working with different aspects of democracy. Most people know the meaning of democracy, but in order to understand why and how we should develop it, further steps need to be taken:

Då man lär sig skoldemokrati bäst genom att praktisera den anser vi att man i skolan ska kunna få större möjligheter till detta. Dessa möjligheter kan skapas genom att avsätta tid för samt ge stöd, utbildning och handledning åt elevrådsarbete. För att skolan ska kunna fullfölja sitt samhällsuppdrag krävs det att styrdokumenten efterlevs och respekteras. Så är inte fallet idag. (p.4)

The congress also claimed that instead of maintaining a school based on traditional methods the focus has to be placed on cooperation between teachers and students. Elevrådskongressen wanted the teacher to be an “inspiratör som ska hjälpa eleverna att hitta motivationen i sig själva” (p.5). It also stressed the fact that no teacher can teach a student anything, she can only help her to learn. When reading the entire programme it becomes obvious that the school system is in the middle of a changing process, a process where traditional school procedures and structures are being reevaluated and put in a different context. The present school system is expected to live up to rules and structures typical for a modern democratic society like other modern organisations of today.

Teachers and authority

Pedagogisk handbook (1976) discusses the difficulties of pinpointing what authority is about. The discussion underlines the difficulties teachers can have when trying to make a clear definition of the concept. It states that authority “tillskrivs i regel en person och består i att denne åtnjuter anseende och bemöts med respekt av andra, som därför rättar sig efter honom”. Any statement given by this person is immediately acknowledged as being correct simply because it is given by him. In Pedagogisk Uppslagsbok authority is said to be built on ideals
like knowledge, good judgement and pertinence. However, authority must “skiljas från auktoritär, en auktoritet åtnjuter respekt på basis av vetande och saklighet, inte auktoritärt beteende”.

In her book, *Från undervisning till lärande*, Lena Boström touches on some aspects regarding the importance of fruitful relationships between the teacher and her students. She claims that a teacher’s personality plays a crucial part in the classroom. If the students have confidence in you as a person they will also show confidence to the message you want to convey especially when it comes to so called difficult students, good relations are crucial.

Med vårt kroppsspråk kan vi underlätta eller försvåra kontakten. Dina värderingar och din grundsyn genomsyrar dina attityder och ditt handlade. Du kan aldrig förändra vare sig kollegor eller elever, bara genom förebilder kan du visa dem alternativ. (p.127)

In his book *Den mellanmänskliga vägen – Martin Bubers relationsfilosofi som pedagogisk vägvisning*, Jonas Aspelin shows his reader how Martin Buber, one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century according to the book, stresses the importance of the teacher’s personality. According to Buber, what determines if the relationship between teacher and student is going to be based on reciprocity and trust is not primarily “faktorer som hur utbildningen organiseras, vilka metoder läraren använder sig av, hur kunnig hon är, vilka uppgifter hon ger eller vilket stoff hon väljer ut” (p.133). The most important factor is the teacher, a living creature of flesh and blood, someone the students feel they can relate to.


In their book *Didaktik för lärare – En bok om lärares yrke i teori och praktik*, Gerd B Arfwedsson and Gerhard Arfwedson discuss the challenges teachers have to face in our democratic modern society. They take their starting point in what they state is the most important task for our school system today, namely to give students a “demokratisk grundsyn” (p.192). They discuss different aspects that become visible when striving towards
just that. They seem to agree with Aspe lin and stress the importance of a personal commitment in the teacher/student relationship. All students have a right to be seen and listened to. Everyone has a right to be heard. Apart from the importance of encouraging the students, they also highlight kindness and a good sense of humour. These features are not enough, however, it is also crucial to have a “enligt både lärares erfarenhet och mängder av forskningsresultat – en fast uppgifts- eller arbetsorientering hos läraren” (p.198). Studies have shown they continue, that even teachers known as being very authoritarian are looked upon as good teachers simply because they manage to create a fruitful learning environment. Studies have also shown that work focused teachers tend to easier keep the social control in her/his class.

Another important aspect Lena Boström wants to stress is the importance of reflecting actively on your role as a leader in the classroom, and she also continues with suggestions on what is needed for teachers to reflect on in a creative manor. She encourages teachers to ask themselves what kind of leaders they are, and reflect upon what their strengths and weaknesses are. She stresses the importance of searching for sources to new inspiration and striving towards attaining a balance in your role as an expert as well as tutor.
Lena Boström touches here on the complexity of being a good teacher, when she stresses the importance of high skills in your specific subject area as well as social and emotional competence. To be able to develop these skills she sees time for reflection as being crucial, preferably in active discussions with colleagues or others. In *Värdepedagogik i internationell belysning*, Gunnel Colnerud and Robert Thornberg discuss what could be regarded as the backside of this kind of reflection. They state that there is a tendency for teachers to perhaps overanalyse and reflect on their profession and themselves. According to them, uncertainty is spreading among teachers, especially young teachers seem to struggle with these issues:

Lärareosäkerhet inför – och tvivel över – det berättigade att hävda vissa värden befaras ha ökat (Tate 1997). Om allt blir en fråga om preferenser – vad man gillar och inte gillar – kan inte lärare med tyngd hävda att vissa värden skall respekteras. Tate (1996) menar att de som arbetar i utbildning saknar självförtroende att ge moralisk ledning i frågor som kan förefalla omtvistade och kontroversiella. Han menar vidare att särskilt unga lärare, som inte vill medverka i tidigare generationers förtryckande fördomar mot utsatta grupper, kan hamna i värdeosäkerhet. (p.23)

Merely being a teacher does not provide any guarantees against being met with respect. This is a viewpoint stressed by Curt Andersson in his report *Kunskapssyn och lärande – i samhälle och perspektiv*. He states that young people of today have not been given the same values as earlier generations and that they therefore do not look up to authorities or even acknowledge there are such things as authority. He talks about the need for teachers of today to show what kind of value system is current. This costs an immense amount of energy and stubbornness and many teachers give up on this struggle that seems to be necessary in order to attain any kind of respect and sense of authority. Furthermore, “det saknas dessutom möjligheter att stödja sig på någon form av korrektionsmedel eller sanktioner. Dessa är sedan länge borttagna” (p.87). He concludes that a teacher’s skill on his specific subject area does not guarantee that he will be regarded as an authority automatically.

**Authority crises from a wider perspective**

In his book *Teaching in the Knowledge Society – education in the age of insecurity*, Andy Hargreaves addresses what he sees as the big problem in the present western school systems.
He is worried of the current lack of relations between both teachers and students but also between colleagues and he seems to suggest that this could cause crises to occur between teachers and students (as well as between colleagues). He states that teachers are experiencing pressure from many various directions and are expected to solve an enormous amount of different occurring situations as well as coping with a never ending stream of changes put upon them by politicians and other school leaders. He claims that this is creating an environment for teachers where creativity and fruitful new ways of thinking are being suffocated. The working situation for teachers today is one where teachers are disillusioned and stressed out, a situation where teachers often feel that they are losing their ability to recover (p.122).

Hargreaves also claims that a big part of the problem lies in the fact that the school system is expected to put all its focus on attaining clear and standardised goals for the students, a focus that is destined to fail. Hargreaves stresses the importance of putting an equal big part of the focus in preparing and teaching students to be good democrats and citizens of the world, a world where people are not standardised and all the same. He highlights the question concerning schools taking too much impression of the industrial life where attaining standardised goals is the main focus, a focus Hargreaves is convinced is going to backfire on our students. He states that we have to strive against putting as much focus on social intelligence as we do on a more technical one, meaning for instance that more time has to be set aside for building caring relationships between students and teachers and for creating a fruitful environment for learning. For teachers to be able to work with soft and not very measurable issues there has to be taken a good look at their working situation for example when it comes to their work load as well as their social situation, “if you are not happy as an individual, then you are not happy as a professional” (p.109). He questions how schools can “become learning and caring communities given everything that teachers and their systems have experienced and endured in the past 15 years of educational upheaval and reform” (p. 127)?

He also describes in his book various signs of what could be called dysfunction in our society today. He describes for instance our society as being an “entertainment society where fleeting images, instant pleasure and minimal thought have us amusing ourselves to death” (p.25). He is also concerned by the “inrush of emails and mobile messages” that makes us feel wanted and needed but at the same time demands quick answers and reactions instead of stepping
back and putting things in their right perspective. He suggests that we instead of being focused on external demands all of the time we also have to take time to collect our thoughts and meditate on different issues.

Another issue stressed by is the one concerning the importance of raising the status of being a teacher. He sees it as crucial that the working environments as well as the low wages for teachers are changed radically. He says about teaching that it has to be a "career of first choice, a job for grow-up intellectuals, a long-term commitment, a social mission, a job for life" (p.51). He is worried of scenery today where teaching is starting to become a second best career, something you become when your first choice alternative has been excluded or something you do until better working options show up.

Summary

Barnard stresses the importance of equality between the participants. None of the participants can be superior to the other. The conditions of the relationship must be clearly defined, a fact that Skolpolitiskt program agrees upon. Jonas Aspelin/Martin Buber highlights the relationship between the participants. The most crucial thing, according to them, is that the teacher stands before his student as a living creature of flesh and blood making your knowledge on your specific knowledge field an inferior part of your skills as a teacher. Lena Boström seems to agree when she highlights the importance of a fruitful relationship between the teacher and her students as well as emotional and social competence. Boström stresses the importance of raising good democrats and Buber/Aspelin encourages teachers to encourage their students to being humanists. Hargreaves sums it up by showing the importance of equal effort being put on achieving technical as well as social skills amongst students. He claims that too much effort has been laid on achieving the technical goals and that we now have to focus on social and ethical goals. In order to achieve that there has to be made radical changes when it comes to teachers working situations so that time is being given to develop the skills just mentioned among teachers as well as students.
3 Method

This thesis is based on qualitative interviews and aims at exploring how authority affects teachers’ every day lives. My hope was that my interview questions would not be to directed and therefore leaving room for the discussion to move in various directions and for the various opinions to be expressed naturally as they are perceived by teachers today. In *Doing qualitative research in education settings*, J.Amos Hatch states that interview questions should be “designed to get the informants talking about their experiences and understandings” (p.102), and obviously it was my hope that my questions would have that effect. This left me with an interview result that pointed in many various directions and it became strikingly clear that the discussion concerning teachers’ authority in classrooms is one that stirs up feeling and moves the participants in the discussion in directions one might not have expected. To bring clarity and structure to the various answers given by the informers, they were divided up in different domains or groups, domains and groups that make the material easier to work with. They were then analysed and put together in order to highlight similarities as well as differences.

My interviews took place in small town in the South of Sweden. The municipality has about 40 000 inhabitants.

My informants were teachers at Komvux as well as an upper secondary school. The upper secondary school was also where I had some of my teaching practice during my education. The teachers interviewed at Komvux were teachers that I had come to know previously during my practicum periods and I therefore knew that they would have many interesting viewpoints to share and I was also certain of their wish to participate fully in the thesis. All of the four teachers were teachers that were known to me as teachers with strong opinions and were therefore a natural choice since they were informants that had “knowledge about everyday life in the settings being studied” which J. Amos Hatch stresses as being crucial (p.98). Three male and one female teacher were interviewed.
The interviews were based on the same seven questions but since they were constructed to be open-ended since “the power of qualitative interviewing is that it gives informants opportunities to share the unique perspective in their own words” (p.106), the outcome of the interviews showed to be of various characters. Obviously, I designed the question using previous experiences on the subject as well as the purpose of my investigation as a starting point.

The interviews were carried out individually at the schools and they all lasted for approximately one hour each since that is “a good rule of thumb” (p. 111). I made sure that the rooms that we used for the interviews were rooms where we would not risk being disturbed or overheard. They were recorded on tape, to avoid the inconvenience of having to take notes during our discussions. The interviews were then transcribed “right away” (p. 116). The interviews were carried out in Swedish. I had my doubts whether to translate the interviews into English or not since I was concerned that that might change the “tone” of what each teacher tried to convey. I decided however, to translate the answers into English to facilitate the reading of this thesis. The teachers were also informed that they would remain anonymous which means that in the part of this thesis where the teachers are quoted they have been given the names Teacher A, Teacher B etc.

The interview sessions were always started off with background questions where the participants were asked about their background in order to show my interest “and start a pattern of conversation ass opposed to recitation” (p. 103). They were then given the article written by Drummond and Edin which was mentioned in the introduction, but I clarified that the interview was not meant to be a comment on the article. The article was instead intended to be a starting point of a discussion dealing with various aspects of authority.

Before starting the interviews, the teachers were informed of the purpose of the interview as well as the questions I wished to investigate. The questions concerned:

- What are the teacher’s own definitions of authority?
- How do teachers think students look upon authority?
- What is it in today’s society that influences teachers’ as well as students’ view of authority?
4 Presentation of the interview results

The teachers

The four teachers I chose for my investigation were picked for various reasons. Two of them worked at the school were I have had my teaching practice and the other two worked at Komvux in the same town. The reason why I chose the two latter was partly because they were available and partly because I thought it would be interesting to hear their opinion since this particular Komvux often receive students that come directly from upper secondary school. I was therefore convinced that they could have interesting experiences to share since they, or so I suspected, saw what results upper secondary school had brought the students. They were all teaching different subjects and since I did not see the results of my investigation depending on what subject areas the teachers had, that was not taken into further consideration.

Teacher A
Teacher A is in his late thirties and the youngest of all his colleagues at Komvux. He hinted that this fact at times could be problematic when it came to development and progress. He teaches primarily Civics.

Teacher B
Teacher B is in his late twenties. He also teaches Civics but at an upper secondary school and he was the youngest of the teachers interviewed.

Teacher C
Teacher C is in her early fifties and she was the only female teacher interviewed. She teaches Swedish and French at Komvux.

Teacher D
Teacher D is in his early sixties and the oldest of the teachers interviewed. He teaches Philosophy and Swedish at the same upper secondary school as teacher B.

All of the teachers interviewed were accommodating and provided me with various aspects on the subject. However, when reading this thesis, one can see that the viewpoints of teacher A
have been given slightly more space than the others. I am aware of the fact and this should be taken into consideration when considering the trustworthiness of this thesis. However, the viewpoints provided to me by teacher A, were very useful and interesting and could not be left out.

**What is authority?**

“Is authority to be a Caligula that hits people in head with knowledge or is authority to be able to spellbind an audience with ones skills in a certain area?”

Teacher A

The teachers that were asked to comment on the concept of authority presented their aspects in different ways. Teacher A wanted to define authority as a chain reaction caused by the kind of status you achieve when you are a gifted storyteller since a gifted storyteller often have good skills in his or her subject field and that then leads to the teacher being very secure in his or her role as a teacher. Teacher A also wanted to make a distinction between what he called a natural authority and an unnatural authority. A natural authority possesses the qualities mentioned above combined with a gift to be able to create a climate in a classroom that makes the students want to listen. The latter ability is not easy to describe in words. Teacher A also presented a theory regarding natural and unnatural authority. He claimed that a teacher loses his natural authority when he tries to force his authority on others, meaning that when he had to make the students aware of his authority as a teacher then he had already lost his natural authority.

Teacher B’s definition of authority moved towards showing proof of having good skills in leadership, something that teacher A also stressed when he stated that “authority having to do with good skills in your subject field and with being a good leader, yes, then authority is a good thing!”

Teacher B saw authority as a positive thing, as a way of leading the students in a positive direction. He also stressed that he found it to be crucial to make it clear to the students that he actually was the leader of the group. Teacher A saw it as crucial that teachers were aware of
the fact that the role of a teacher involves being a leader. To be a good teacher you have to have good leadership skills.

Teacher C expressed concern with the idea that teachers are authorities. She said that she had no interest in being an authority. The only thing she was clear about, she said, had to do with keeping the order in the classroom and mentioned cell phones as a big problem. Her solution when things got out of control was sometimes to simply leave the room. She made it clear that she refused to be the one shouting for attention in the classroom. She also saw a big drawback with working too much on being an authority in the classroom in the sense that you then have to live up to that role forever, something that could prevent the classroom from being a nice place to go to.

The interviews brought up another aspect of being an authority when many of the teachers started to talk about authority as being a product of a fruitful relationship between the teacher and his students.

Teacher A gave a very clear idea of what could help towards being respected as an authority in the classroom, aspects that to a certain degree were similar to the ones just cited. His experience was that if you manage to convince your students that you actually have something important to communicate to them, then the question of you being an authority or not ever becomes an issue. The students have to go through the process of deciding if this person or teacher is trustable, just as we all do when we are faced with new acquaintances for example politicians or journalists. He saw it as natural that the students takes time to figure out if this teacher is capable of pulling his task through and he interestingly uses the phrase “The students are testing the teacher to find out if they dare to trust the teacher enough to want to listen and believe in him or her. After a while it becomes clear to them that it went ok and they submit to that.” It is interesting to look upon trust as being a crucial part of being an authority in the classroom.

Sign of the times?

“We’ve worked hard to get away from the old authoritarian
Teacher A stated that the school system faces an interesting crossroad. He asked himself if the school is meant to deal with knowledge and encouraging individuals and their opportunities or if the school in fact is moving towards being a reformatory school and social institution that deals with completely different issues. Is it really the teachers that are meant to deal with these other issues and are they competent enough to take a task once given to social workers and supervisors? Teacher A was concerned about these issues since it is clear that teachers are not educated in dealing with these kinds of challenging issues.

The interviewed teachers all agreed that there had been a major change in how authority is looked upon in today’s society compared to what it looked like only 50 years ago. They all agreed that the fact that you are a teacher is no longer guarantees to being met with respect.

They all mentioned the way teachers were looked upon not so many years ago and all mentioned that priests and teachers used to be top authorities. Interestingly enough the two male teachers brought up almost similar things and even more interestingly, the female teacher did not mention any of the aspects that the male teachers pointed out as being crucial. The first thing the two younger male teachers mentioned was the aspect of status. They were both of the opinion that teaching as a profession is not synonymous with high status. To be a teacher means having a low income and not many possibilities to make a career. Teacher A stated that the school is simply a mirror to society, a society where salaries and career opportunities are parameters that decide if a profession has high status or not.

Teacher A took it as far as saying that it is no longer the best qualified that want to become teachers, it is always the second best that chooses that path. Teacher B agreed and added that he was of the clear impression that the different schools of education through Sweden showed a tendency to help too many students through the education by lowering the standards, students that he was convinced were not competent enough to work as teachers. This was an issue that had to be dealt with at once, according to him.

Teacher A had a similar opinion. “If one could cast the School of Education in a different mould, it would be possible to change the way things are in school”. He was also critical
towards what was going on at the schools of education. He found it difficult to move away from a pedagogy based on mediation towards a pedagogy based on what he described as pupils’ activity. He was of the impression that the former pedagogy was regarded as old fashioned and out of date, an opinion he did not share.

Teacher C took on the subject from a different angle. She saw the authority crisis in the school partially as a result of how parents raise their children. She mentioned the concept of curling parents as being part of the problem. According to her, the problems we see in school today is part of an aftermath caused by children growing up with the feeling that they are the leaders of their families. She also stated that she was of the impression that students today are not in school to actually learn something new. Instead, students today seem convinced that they already know all that needs to be known and that they are in school to confirm just that. It has become up to the children to decide on all activities of family life from a young age. She saw the same tendency in the earlier classes of school. The children have to make many choices, too many choices. She could see that it sounded nice to say that children should take more responsibility from an early age but personally she did not believe in it. Another thing that she saw as characteristic for the time we live in was that we live in a very split society. The modern man is never at just one place at a time, something that also shows itself in the classrooms, she said. She felt that the students are not fully present, they are always in contact with another place, whether it has to do with their cell phones or text messages. “They are never present here and now. You can see that after a couple of minutes they have to check their phones or something else. This is sad since I believe that we need just that, concentration or simply peace and quiet.”

Teacher D presented another interesting thought regarding our society today and how it is inflecting the school system. He claimed that students of today are not used to accomplishing things through hard work. They are very much influenced by a society that encourages immediate need satisfaction something that is not compatible with what is needed in accomplishing good results in studying, according to teacher D. He also saw a tendency that schools strive towards being as similar as possible to the entertainment industry, a direction he considered to be very dangerous. In doing that we turn our school system into a commercial business which has nothing to do with what has to be the core of all education as well as upbringing. These are entities that, according to teacher D, must involve being prepared to work hard and sometimes with issues not regarded as amusing.
Finally, teacher A mentioned another aspect of how the school environment has changed. He explained that he had students that had come straight from upper secondary school and were still not mature enough to take responsibility for their education. He thought that the problem was that they never have to take their studies seriously in upper secondary school and they were still not able to be serious about their studies.

**Strategies to avoid authority crises**

“I believe, since I’m like that by nature, that it gets obvious to the students when I’m irritated. I believe that they can read me as an open book. Now she’s mad!”

Teacher C

When asked to give examples of authority crisis two of the teachers had difficulties finding any. Teacher A went so far as saying that he could not think of any. “Or maybe I just have not been open for it! I have always been met with some kind of respect for who I am!”

Teacher B gave an example where he had been threatened by a student since he had not been satisfied with the grade he had been given but apart from that he did not see authority crisis as being something he had to deal with. Teacher D could not give any examples of authority crisis, although he did bring up an example where the students had not been satisfied with a novel he had chosen for them to read. He saw it as being very important for teachers to stick to their decision that the students should read a certain book. “If a student should say to me that he did not want to read Strindberg I would say that I do not give a damn. I have decided that you should. End of discussion.” It was my clear impression that he did not see this as an example of an authority crisis. It is very interesting to compare teacher D’s answer with the answer given by teacher C, the female teacher. She was very clear on the fact that these kinds of discussions are in fact examples of authority crisis, but her way of dealing with it was different than teacher D’s. “You do not have to like the books that I choose but I demand that
they read at least fifty pages of the book and if they can give me a good reason why they do not like the book then it is fine with me. I accept that but I have to know why!”

Apart from the example mentioned above she also brought up the inability to hand in assignments on time. This issue made her every day life as a teacher much more complicated than it was before since it made it more difficult to leave one area and continue with another since people kept handing in “old stuff” throughout the term. Finally she mentioned a tendency not to trust the teacher’s competence in certain areas. She mentioned having discussions where she had actually stood with a dictionary in her hand as proof of being right. Even so, the student in question had refused to accept that she was wrong. Teacher C was the only teacher who gave clear examples of different authority crises whereas the others were vaguer in their answers. Interestingly enough, she even said “ask any teacher about these things and they will all agree”. This was not the case in the interviews though!

When the question concerning different strategies arose, the answers went in different directions. Teacher A stated that he felt secure in his role as a gifted story teller. He said that he was used to being taken seriously and that he could not imagine how he would react if the situation occurred that he for some reason was not taken seriously. During our conversation he asked himself if he was actually able to use his authority as a teacher in the case that the students one day would not listen to what he had to say. He showed a great deal of scepticism towards himself shouting to the students to shut up and demanding them to treat him respectfully. The reason for this was that he was convinced that once a teacher has ordered the students to respect him because of his authority as a teacher, then he has already lost, as he expressed it. Once the teacher has had to remind the students of his authority then he has lost, what he called, his natural authority. He was of the opinion that the teacher then continuously had to give evidence to the students of his authority and that was a situation teachers should avoid putting themselves in. Teacher C shared his opinion, as mentioned earlier, when she feared a classroom situation where she always had to live up to her role as an authority. Teacher D did not think that it was possible to have any kind of strategies when it came to authority. He found it important to stress that there are students that no teacher can succeed with, with or without authority.

The teachers seemed to agree that it was almost impossible to pinpoint what parts in your behaviour that increase the students’ respect for you as an authority. The teachers also had
problems in giving clear examples of strategies to use in order to enhance their authority and the reason for that could be that teachers today have lost their means of exerting pressure.

Legitimate authority

“This thing, not having the courage, or becoming of two minds, is related to the time we live in, and this certainly complicates matters in our profession making teaching harder than it has been.”

Teacher D

All of the four teachers agreed that it was a clear sign of the times we live in that teachers continuously question their legitimacy to be authorities and the concept of authority. The result of the interviews did not show, however, that this was an issue that mainly concerned the younger teachers. All of the teachers, regardless of their age, clearly expressed that they were frequently questioning or reflecting on their legitimacy to be authorities.

Teacher D saw it as crucial not to question oneself, but to reflect on it. He was of the opinion that teachers should keep an ongoing discussion with themselves regarding what it actually is that we base our legitimacy on. He was concerned by the fact that the schools of education move away from concentrating on the actual subject fields, since he was convinced that young teachers lose their authority when they are robbed of their skills in their specific subject.

Teacher C stated that she questioned her own role and rights as a teacher much more frequently now than when she was younger and more inexperienced. She told me that she, on many occasions, had visited the principal’s room to be informed on her rights in many different areas. “I can see a change in my own behaviour. I have been a teacher for 25 years but I more often than before ask our principal if I have the right to say certain things to my students, often wondering if I might be breaking some law when saying them”. She gave an example regarding cell phones. She admitted to have doubted if she was right to forbid students to talk in their cell phones during class. She had read an article written by upper secondary students where they had identified the problem as being the teachers. The reason why cell phones was a problem in class rooms was, according to these students, the fact that
most of the teachers in our schools today are too old and unable to see that times are changing and that it is now acceptable to use cell phones during class. Teacher C admitted that she had given this article a whole lot of thought and that she couldn’t ignore the possibility that these students actually could be right.

Teacher B agreed that it was important to reflect on your role and legitimacy as an authority instead of questioning yourself since they both saw the questioning itself a negative approach to the problem. His main concern during the earlier part of his career had been not to fall for the temptation to become one of gang. Since he was young when he started to work as teacher he had focused on being clear about what his role was in the classroom. He admitted to having made mistakes during his first years and it was obvious to him that this had not helped him to be an authority. Interestingly enough, he did say that it was his impression that he, during his first years, was respected as an authority simply by the fact that he was so young, something that had changed even if he had not turned thirty yet! He stated that he was now looked upon the same way as the other teachers. “Now that I have become older they do not seem to look at me as being the cool teacher anymore. Now I am just as boring as the other teachers it seems!”

The fact that being a young teacher could enhance your possibilities to be regarded as an authority only shows the complexity of the concept.
6 Analysis

The four interviews show both clear similarities as well as differences when analysing the results of the four interviews. When it came to defining authority it was interesting to see what the four teachers each stressed as being the crucial part. The oldest of the four, a male teacher in his early sixties, was very clear on the importance of high skills in the teacher’s specific subject area, a statement that corresponds well with the lexical meaning of the word authority as cited earlier in this thesis. He stated than when society stops seeing this as the most important part of your authority, it robs the teachers of their legitimacy to be teachers. It was not my impression that he saw leadership skills as being crucial at all.

Conversely, the two younger male teachers stressed the importance of leadership skills. They talked enthusiastically about the importance of leading the students in the right direction and used phrases like “authority is about being a leader that manages to lead the people or lead the group”, “I see nothing wrong in reminding the students of who’s really in charge” or “The teacher’s job is to be a leader, a boss. You’re the boss in the classroom and the students expect you to be able to take on that task.” Since it’s almost impossible to draw any conclusions after having interviewed only four teachers, with only one of them female, I’ll restrict myself to simply observing that the female teacher never came close to talking about authority in these terms. On the contrary she expressed a clear wish to move away from any kind of authority thinking.

According to the two male teachers, authority is strongly related to strong leadership or good leadership skills, something that Lena Boström also stated when she defined a good leader as being someone who possessed qualities as “djup och bred ämnesteoretisk grund med social och emotionell kompetens i mötet med elever och föräldrar”(p.127). Her viewpoints corresponded well with those of the teachers. She stressed self reflection and actively working with your own qualities as a teacher as something crucial to a healthy school environment.

Regarding authority crises, the interviews showed that the teachers had different ways of defining them, just as the case was with the concept of authority. It was my impression that
three of the teachers did not see authority crises as an issue in their everyday life. It was only the female teacher that seemed concerned and she gave several examples of what she saw as problematic. It seemed as if what one teacher saw as an authority problem was regarded as being a natural part of the process of learning to another. This confirms the statement that a part of the problem with authority is that teachers and others in general seem to have a hard time just pinpointing what the concept is about, something that automatically, I would claim, must add to the confusion on how to deal with authority issues.

It became interesting when the discussion started to move away from the obvious discussion areas. I found it very interesting when teacher A named trust as being a crucial part of authority. One of his viewpoints was that authority is a process where you as a teacher in different ways are building a capital of trust and that that trust plays a major role in you being respected as an authority later on. The students have to be able, he said, to trust both your ability to lead the students in the right directions as well as possessing the skills required in your specific subject area. When this trust has been confirmed the issue of authority seldom has to be taken up again. Here he suggests that authority is something static, however, this aspect of the concept authority stands in opposition to what the teachers then went on to say with regard to authority, namely that being an authority also involves being able to always develop and work with the relationship between you and the students.

The teacher’s role as an authority seems to be an excellent example of the difficulties our school system is challenged with today. All four teachers agreed of the importance of questioning your own role as a teacher and they also agreed that the profession has faced great changes and is still in the middle of a changing process. Could it be that the schools are in fact our main arena when it comes to making the difficulties of our ever-changing society visible? Should we as teachers perhaps take on a more positive attitude when it comes to facing the difficulties in our schools and be thankful that we are taking part in a process that is very much alive? Lena Boström writes “Jag vidrör framtiden, jag arbetar i skolan.” a statement that, according to me, breathes positivism and a belief in the future. Could it be that a classroom free of conflict died with the last authoritarian teacher and that we should be happy for it? Taking part of conflicts in our classrooms also means taking part in young people’s struggle to grow up in a society that is ever-changing and to witness them doing the best they can. Thomas Gordon stresses that students’ reactions towards authorities is highly natural
when he claims that “Reaktionen är universell. När människors frihet hotas, reagerar de genom att vägra eller trotsa. De gör tvärtemot, om de vågar” (p.145).

In his book *Pedagogiskt ledarskap*, Roland Bohlin stresses that when students go from having authoritarian teachers to more democratic leaders it is not unusual that during a period of transition the difficulties seem to increase. He claims that the number of conflicts seems to increase for a period of time but that that is only to be expected when you go from one type of leadership to another. Even though Bohlin seems to be talking about a specific school situation and not on authority in general, I would claim that this could also be seen in a larger perspective as well as in a specific school context. The teachers interviewed seemed to agree on the fact that our school system is in the midst of an enormous changing process. The school system is facing huge demands of changes and progress which was implied earlier on in this thesis for example in the excerpt from *Skolpolitiskt program*. Considering what Bohlin says about an increase in numbers of conflict, we should perhaps view the difficulties our school system is facing today as a natural and healthy process that has to take place. It is inevitable and very much needed. So instead of giving in to hopelessness and loosing faith we should focus on the fact that we as teachers are given the opportunity to witness a healthy and natural process in history!

Andy Hargreaves states however, that more time needs to be set aside for teachers to be able to take in all the changes that society and politicians continually put the school system through, and he thereby presents a constructive solution to the challenges teachers are faced with today. Changes, he claims, demands an enormous amount of brain work in order to be constructive for teachers as well as students and he sees a clear lack of time set aside for these causes in our school system today. Hargreaves seems to agree with Boström that there has to be more consistency in putting time aside for personal development amongst teachers. Without that teachers are doomed to be stressed out and disillusioned after a short period of time, something that inevitably will cause sever disturbances in the relations between teachers and students. Hargreaves also stresses the importance of raising the status of teaching and it’s interesting to see that the teachers also pinpointed this as being crucial. Hargreaves seems to agree with what teacher A and teacher B saw as crucial, namely that things has to change regarding to who seeks to the schools of education. The tendency of the second best qualified are the ones becoming teachers is a sever problem that has to be addressed immediately. It is also interesting that the teachers also pinpoint other tendencies brought up by Hargreaves in
his report, tendencies that Hargreaves seems to find disturbing and worrying. Teacher D for example, saw it crucial to discuss the influences the school system are taking from the entertainment industry today, an industry where immediate satisfaction is the main interest and teacher C mentions the tendency of students being so busy checking their cell phones just in case someone might look for them or need them.

Another aspect that perhaps needs to be taken into consideration is that we as teachers should acknowledge that we must take an active part in working towards if not definitive solutions that I would claim do not exist, being more active and open to this changing process as such. I have witnessed a reluctance amongst teachers to work actively with their own personalities and perhaps this is why it is so easy to “blame everything” on factors outside of yourself. Could it be that this sad tendency starts already at the schools of education? However, three of the teachers mentioned the schools of education as a problem that needed to be addressed, and I have no wish to minimize or lessen their opinions and experiences. No doubt, schools of education are facing great difficulties in our ever changing society. In their book *Lärarledarskap*, Mariann Landin and Christina Hellström suggest that part of the problem could lie in the fact that the study of group processes at the schools of education is on a far too theoretical level. Group dynamics and group processes have to be experienced with all the feelings and reactions that that kind of learning provides. Here Landin and Hellström come close to what Lena Boström, Aspelin/Buber as well as Hargreaves suggest namely that being a teacher involves so much more than theoretical knowledge. I would claim that they want to stress the importance of teachers being far more aware of the importance of being human and present as such. Accordingly one could suggest that much more time needs to be laid on increasing and developing teachers emotional and social competence both during their schooling years but even more once their out on “the field” working. Being a teacher means that you constantly have to face demanding situations interacting with colleagues, students and parents. In order to handle them responsibly, more time has to be laid on teachers’ further training in areas such as emotional and social competence. But Landin and Hellström also wish to protest to the tendency to blame the schools of education for this problem:

> Vi vill ändå inte gå så långt som att lägga hela ansvaret på lärarutbildningen. Vi tror att den viktigaste uppgiften för den är att göra studenterna medvetna om att det ställs höga krav på ledarskap i deras framtida yrke. Trots allt är det så mycket annat som skall läras in under utbildningen. (p.88)
The interviews showed that teachers, to some extent, feel confused about what their roles as teachers are. One of them even asked himself if teachers are meant to be social workers, door keepers or teachers. In that case, he continued, we have been educated in the wrong areas. This statement is a good example on how many aspects are involved in teaching today, aspects that call for social as well as emotional competence. To expect schools of education to be able to cover all of these areas could be regarded as somewhat naive and perhaps another indication for the need of developing emotional and social skills?

Naturally, schools of education have to continue their work and it is urgent that they improve in several ways, but to put all the blame for the problems in our school system today on these schools, seems to me to be a shallow way of dealing with a problem that needs to be addressed on many more and deeper levels and we need to recognise that the school of education are also being presented to changes decided on a political level. My study shows, I would claim, that teachers must continue demanding more time set aside for reflection, personal development and what Hargreaves defines as brain work in order to cope with the changes and emotional challenges we are faced with today. It is my experience that a majority of the teachers I’ve met so far possess all of the qualities needed to take on the challenge in our school system today. It is crucial however that we keep on striving towards a working situation that gives us a chance to use and develop the skills we already possess.

The conclusion of this research is that the school system is facing challenges when it comes to authority related issues. The interviews showed that teachers themselves are confused about the difference between being an authority and having an authoritarian behaviour which even more underlines the importance of discussing the matter further. Two of the informants talked about leadership skills, one of them talked about high skills in your specific subject area and the last one did not give any definition at all. This confusion also became obvious when the informants were asked to give example of authority related situations they had experienced in their every day life. What one informant saw as a problem was seen as natural to another. They all agreed on a negative trend regarding the climate in the school today though, even if they had great difficulties in pinpointing what they actually meant.

Hargreaves as well as two of the informants mentions the entertainment society of today as a factor causing difficulties. Cell phones, text messages as well as the never ending flow of
amusement are creating young people without the ability to slow down and reflect upon their own situation. If something is boring they simply refuse take part in it. Are we that work in the school system today forced to live up to this trend or should we be doing all in our power to work against it? This is an interesting question for further research!

Students today are growing up in a different society, a society that is trying to build upon each individual’s democratic rights and their right to express their opinions and that collides with older times’ authoritarian ways. It is my impression that students are reluctant to “take orders” or instructions from someone they have no relation to. This is an extremely interesting point. It is easy to see the sympathetic part in this trend, but are we not in fact lying to our students when we imply that it is realistic to think that you can have relations to everyone you meet in our society, and if you don’t you can simply refuse to cooperate with them? If you see the role as a teacher as one where you should prepare the students for their adult life the discussion of relations could be misleading. As an adult in our society today you have to be able to follow directions without questioning every single part of it.

Hargreaves, Aspelin and Boström are all stressing the importance of building relations, Boström stresses the importance of working with your social and emotional competence as a teacher and Hargreaves sees it as crucial that we take a good look at teachers’ working situation and the time they are given to recover. I am convinced that this is the direction school leaders and politicians must strive against in order to make a positive change in schools today, and the problem needs to be addressed now. The school has to be given the opportunity and resources it needs to be able to work much harder in attaining emotional goals. I am convinced that that will have a very positive influence on students when it comes to achieving more technical or standardised goals. If the resources are not given there is a possibility that we will fail in creating students that are humanists and good democrats, something that Buber/Aspelin also suggest is the main goal for any school system!
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Interview Teacher A (2005-11-29)
Interview Teacher B (2005-11-29)
Interview Teacher C (2005-12-21)
Interview Teacher D (2005-12-21)
**Intervjuunderlag**

- Du har nu läst artikeln *Våga säga ifrån* skriven av Nick Drummond och Mats Edin. Vad är din spontana kommentar till det du just läst?
- Hur ser du på auktoritet? Vad innebär det för dig som lärare att vara en auktoritet?
- Hur tror du att elever ser på auktoritet?
- Finns det något i vår tidsanda som har gjort att lärarens auktoritet undergrävs?
- Gunnel Colnerud och Robert Thornberg antyder i sin rapport *Värdepedagogik i internationell belysning* att lärare är osäkra på sin roll som en auktoritet i klassrummet, att lärare idag gör upp med gamla roller. Kommentar?
- Har du utvecklat någon typ av strategi för att respekteras som en auktoritet i klassrummet?
- Kan du ge något exempel på auktoritetskriser som har uppstått i ditt klassrum?