

Book Review

Classroom Authority: Theory, Research, and Practice

Judith L. Pace & Annette Hemmings
Lawrence Erlbaum Associates (2006)

Reviewed by

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Abstract

This book states all through clearly that classroom authority delivers to teachers both fundamental and pressing issues at all levels of schooling, including fundamental issues considerations as to what it means to be an authoritative teacher, and the pressing issues on consideration of how to enact one's authority as a teacher in specific settings. The book, viewed as an attempt to combine these two avenues of consideration, is striking with insight and advice as an example of research. Teacher authority in this specific case, can be regarded as relating to both the applied problem of teachers creating and maintaining authority in their classrooms and the fundamental problem of defining the core of teacher authority. Taking the book as combining these elements, the essays in it are of equal importance for both teachers and educational researchers; however, if the book resists this reading of it and emphasize that its scope includes only applied research, it will gradually lose its usefulness. So I review the book in the following focusing on the topic of teacher research.

Main Idea of the Book

Chapter one: theoretical distinctions among sorts of authority is entitled as "Understanding classroom authority as a social construction," by the contributing editors of the collection, Judith L. Pace and Annette Hemmings. Pace and Hemmings covers the customary Weberian triad of traditional, charismatic and legal-rational authority; but add a fourth type, particularly apt of teachers, professional authority. Teachers' professional authority comprises subject matter knowledge and pedagogical skill, the most important foundations of teacher authority and the two aspects of teacher authority mostly likely to require constant negotiation of consent between teachers and students. For these reasons, professional authority is a most important sort of authority to study.

Negotiation over curriculum and pedagogy, the essence of teacher's professional authority, is essential for study because it has a moral dimension. Mary Heywood Metz (1978), who wrote the front pages of the book and whose book on teacher authority the editors' identity in their preface as a "deep source of inspiration" for the book, defines authority as a hierarchical arrangement serving a school's moral order, and students share values, norms, and purposes. Thus Pace and Hemmings express a preference for a certain type of professional authority, emancipatory authority or "authority that serves the education of all students as well as the democratic values of justice, the common good, participation, and the freedom to question" (p.26).

With this move, they prescribe a set of criteria on what authority should be in schools and make possible statements of the rest parts of the books as descriptive of ways in which teachers struggle, sometimes successfully, sometimes in vain, to empower and maintain certain given authority.

Chapter two, “Authority, culture, context: Controlling the production of historical knowledge in elementary classrooms”, clarifies that it is not so easy an task to empower authority. In this interesting essay, John S. Wills describes a school setting in which teachers work within a system thus supports their autonomy in creating and delivering curriculum. The admirable result is an enacted ethos of enabling care: but Wills also chronicles the destruction of this commendable ethos when standardized tests enter the scene. A teacher may still be seen as authority in circumstances of standardized testing, but at the same time will not be perceived as in authority. The Bureaucratic authority conveyed to teachers administering standardized tests trumps the professional authority of caring teachers. The general conclusion to draw is something like an educational version of Gresham’s Law (the observation by economists that bad currency always drive out good currency) in which ill authority rules out good one.

Chapter three, “playing with pedagogical authority,” by James Mullooly and Herve Varenne tells much the same story but with greater reluctance. Taking on the risky task of explaining a joke, Mullooly and Varenne describe a scene of classroom interaction in which a student makes an obscene gesture during teacher presentation of the scripted curriculum, including the hand gestures required of teachers by the curriculum. These scripted gestures suggested the joke to the student, who was not reprimanded by the teacher for telling the joke. The analysis would seem to suggest that what Wills found true for standardized tests seems to apply, as well , to standardized curriculum. With the added finding that bureaucratic authority is easily ridiculed. Although the authors find this line of reasoning plausible, they warn the reader away from “the temptation to label the students, the teacher, and even the school in terms of properties that would then be the proximate ‘cause’ for the denial of the events” (p.79). This they do to keep methodological focus on “what was actually done” (p.79); but end up depriving readers of a moral to the story.

Chapter four, Judith L. Pace’s “saving (and losing) face, race, and authority: strategies of action in a ninth-grade English class, “examines” author case of bureaucratic authority driving out professional authority. Pace looks at a teacher’s bureaucratic authority in her efforts to motivate students to achieve to the level of her expectations, “I saw,” Pace says, “How perplexed and frustrated the teacher became as her feelings of success at winning students’ consent and promoting their academic engagement turned into a sense of failure as she realized these same students were not meeting her expectations” (p.89) The interaction spirals downward throughout the essay until the teacher finally locates difficulties in the students, rather than in the curriculum or her delivery of it.

In Chapter 5, Janet S. Bixby sets a second theme of the book, “Authority in detract high school classrooms: Tensions among individualism, equity and legitimacy.” Bixby studies the relation of the two parts of teacher professional authority, subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical skill, in a context in which teachers aggrandize the former and belittle the latter. Teacher committed primarily to subject-matter authority resisted administrative requirement that they use more inclusive pedagogies than their customary banking model of instruction. These teachers, Bixby reports, were caught in a tight political and professional bind. On the one hand, they worked within a school culture that was driven by the strong pull of individualism and credentialing...At the same time, the growing percentage of students who were not succeeding in their classes and administrative concern about this issue put pressure on teachers to change. (129)

Change, however, did not seem to be what the teachers had in mind and they used the school's cultural commitment to college preparation to resist structural change towards detracted classes. Sadly, teacher resistance resulted in teacher realization of only half of their professional authority as they failed to make learning in their class egalitarian.

In Chapter six, Annette Hemmings takes up this theme by commenting on the effects on teacher authority of diminishing the importance of subject-matter knowledge in "Moral order in high school authority: Dis/Enabling care and (un) scrupulous achievement." In two very different cases, an urban high school plagued with problems and a highly reputed suburban high school, diminishment of subject-matter knowledge resulted in corruption of student-teacher authority relations. At the urban school, a misguided attempt by faculty to care for underachieving students by dumbing down the curriculum resulted in increased student disrespect for teachers. Henning notes, "Because teachers in their defensive authority relations with students did not appear to be respecting students as capable learners. Students responded by displaying more blatant disrespect for teachers as incompetent educators" (p.143). Faculty at the suburban school devalued curricular content at student suggestion by inflating grades on substandard work. The result was a school culture in which students could prosper by intentionally asserting "personal power and manipulative influence over others" (p. 147), especially teachers. In this case, student power overran teacher authority. Thus, Bixby also teaches that the concept of teacher professional authority cannot stand long on only one of its legs. If either one of its elements is neglected in favor of the other, teachers lose the authority they required to do their job well.

When it comes to the most satisfying part of the book, Randi Rosenblum rounds out discussion of the relation between subject-matter and pedagogy in teacher professional authority in Chapter 7, "standards and sob stories: Negotiating authority at an urban public college." Much of the strength of this chapter derives from the typology Rosenblum creates to help understand a spectrum of reasoning behind, professors fell along a continuum of positions between flexible supporters and rigid standards bearers, although most preferred an ad hoc approach featuring bounded flexibility. However, as Rosenblum points out, "regardless of where a professor falls on the spectrum of flexibility at any given time, they aim to persuade students to adhere to the educational goals they view as worthwhile" (p.156). The difference among the types specified by Rosenblum seems to be where professors locate ultimate sources of authority in students' lives.

The more authority is located within the exigencies of the curriculum, the more a professor meets the description of a standards bearer. The more the authority is located within the exigencies of students' extra-curriculum lives, the more likely the teacher thinks like a supporter. The more the authority is located within the professor, the more likely that professor is part of the ad hoc majority. These professors prefer to exercise judgment about individual cases in terms of a set of criteria about what counts in the estimation as a serious student and a serious breach of academic integrity. The advantage of this position is that professors exercise authority, as it were, over their authority by reserving judgment until a given case has been examined.

As to "Epilogue: The sources and expressions of classroom authority", David T. Hansen's beneficially summarizes the essays, poses questions for further study, and reiterates the moral theme of the book that teacher authority is best realized in "instances in which teacher and students have given themselves over, metaphorically speaking, to an inquiry... In these circumstances, authority can be understood to shift from the school or the teacher and come to reside in the inquiry itself". Viewed as the editors, the greatest good of teacher authority is found in released authority. From this it follows that the most authoritative teacher is the teacher best able to produce the inquiry most regularly and the best school is the one that creates an environment in which released authority flourishes among its instructional staff.

Seen from this point of view, the essays in this book offer useful advice worthy of consideration by all educators as to what to avoid and what to give a try when seeking to enact emancipatory authority. Seen in this light, the essays also make a contribution to another of Mary Heywood Metz' (1989) conceptual constructs, Real School. In Mertz' view, the problem with current conceptions of Real School is that the similarity they imposed by the common, highly ritualistic script of Real School.

The idea of Real School reconstructs in a way that helps defuse the danger in its generality. Where Real School is defined, in part, as the school in which teachers exercise professional authority, the general concept may be used to reinforce difference rather than similarity. Where teacher authority becomes part of the definition of Real School, what becomes demand of schools is not slavish imitation of some Patonic form of schooling but an expectation that teachers will be constantly negotiating their authority in situation. This reconceptualization of Real School changes the professional lives of teachers immensely and opens up the field of teaching as an endeavor that must be guided by just the sort of considerations the essays in this book bring to foster schooling. It is this reconceptualization of Real School that makes the book important for both teachers and researchers.

Reference

1. Judith L. Pace & Annette Hemmings. *Classroom Authority: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006.