
AUTHORITY WITHOUT AUTHORITARIANISM: REDEFINING THE TEACHER'S ROLE AS FACILITATOR IN DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary educational landscape is marked by profound social, political, and cultural transformations that challenge traditional perceptions of authority, knowledge transmission and the professional role of the teacher. In democratic societies, educational authority can no longer be grounded in authoritarianism, hierarchical dominance, or the exclusive possession of knowledge. Instead, it requires a reconceptualization that aligns pedagogical practice with democratic values such as dialogue, participation, critical thinking, and respect for diversity. The present article aims to examine how teacher authority is transformed within democratic educational contexts and to argue that authority is not abolished but reconstituted as a form of ethical, epistemic, and relational leadership. Drawing on classical and contemporary theoretical frameworks, it argues that the modern teacher's authority is neither diminished nor abolished but reshaped in accordance with democratic norms. The article further seeks to contribute to current scholarly debates by clarifying the conceptual distinction between authority and authoritarianism in education. The study proposes key axes for educational reform, emphasizing the importance of clearly defined norms, the cultivation of critical citizenship, the redefinition of sociality, the development of students' skills and talents, and the strengthening of school–family collaboration. Ultimately, the paper highlights the dialectical relationship between democracy and education, positioning the teacher as a reflective guide and co-learner within a democratic educational framework.

Keywords: Teacher Authority, Democracy In Education, Pedagogical Role, Critical Thinking, Educational Reform

1. INTRODUCTION

Authority has historically constituted a foundational element of educational practice, reflecting broader social structures, hierarchies, and institutional norms. From a sociological perspective, authority represents the organized leadership and normative regulation of social groups, mirroring the structured organization of society itself (Pyrgiotakis, 1999). Within the educational context, this form of authority has traditionally been embodied in the figure of the teacher, who functioned as the primary transmitter of knowledge, values, and social discipline. For much of the twentieth century and in general, in the past, educational authority was closely associated with hierarchical control, obedience, and the unilateral transmission of knowledge. This model corresponded to pedagogical frameworks that emphasized conformity and discipline, often at the expense of dialogue and learner autonomy. However, significant social, cultural, and political transformations during the latter half of the twentieth century initiated a critical re-evaluation of this traditional conception of authority (Adorno et al., 1950).

In contemporary democratic societies, authority has increasingly become a contested and unstable concept. The expansion of democratic ideals, the diversification of social identities, and the rapid diffusion of information through digital technologies have undermined the teacher's former monopoly over specialized knowledge. As a result, the traditional image of the teacher as an unquestionable authority figure has gradually lost its legitimacy (Garapon & Perdriolle, 2000).

This transformation has given rise to what several scholars describe as a "crisis of authority" in education. Rather than signifying the disappearance of authority, this crisis points to its profound transformation. Educational authority is no longer grounded in coercion or institutional power alone, but increasingly depends on ethical legitimacy, professional competence, and relational trust (Gauchet, 2008).

Against this backdrop, the central concern of this article is not whether authority should exist in education, but how it can be redefined in ways that are compatible with democratic principles such as participation, dialogue, and respect for individual autonomy. The article adopts a theoretical and critical approach, drawing primarily on sociological and pedagogical literature, in order to analyze the evolving meaning of educational authority and its implications for the professional role of the teacher.

More specifically, it is argued that democratic education does not imply the erosion of authority, but rather calls for its reconfiguration as an ethical and relational form of professional responsibility. In this sense, the teacher's role is repositioned from that of an authoritarian figure to that of a reflective guide who facilitates learning, critical inquiry, and civic development. By clarifying this reconceptualization, the article seeks to contribute to broader discussions on democracy, education, and the contemporary challenges facing the teaching profession.

2. THE TRANSFORMATION OF EDUCATIONAL AUTHORITY

The transformation of educational authority is closely linked to broader social, cultural, and epistemological changes that have redefined the conditions of teaching and learning in late modern societies. In traditional pedagogical models, the teacher's authority was primarily derived from institutional power and the assumed possession of stable, specialized knowledge. This configuration positioned the teacher as an unquestionable figure whose legitimacy rested on hierarchy, discipline, and obedience.

From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, this conception of authority began to erode. Critical social theory and empirical research highlighted the risks associated with authoritarian educational practices, particularly their tendency to suppress autonomy, critical reflection, and democratic participation (Adorno et al., 1950). These critiques did not merely reject authority as such, but revealed the pedagogical and moral limitations of authority grounded exclusively in coercion and submission. Consequently, the pedagogical paradigm gradually shifted toward learner-centered and dialogical approaches.

At the same time, profound structural changes in society reshaped the theoretical and knowledge-based grounds of educational authority. The rapid expansion of access to information—largely driven by digital technologies—significantly weakened the teacher's traditional monopoly over knowledge. Knowledge is no longer scarce, stable, or transmitted in linear ways; instead, it is fluid, contested, and widely accessible. Within this context, authority can no longer be secured by informational superiority alone, but must be continuously justified through pedagogical competence, ethical credibility, and relational engagement (Edward, 2021).

This shift has had tangible consequences for the social prestige of the teaching profession. The symbolic status once associated with the transmission of certified knowledge has diminished, contributing to a broader sense of professional uncertainty and public ambivalence toward educational expertise (Pasias, Flouris, & Foteinos, 2015). Teachers are increasingly required to negotiate their authority within classrooms characterized by pluralism, heterogeneity, and competing sources of influence, rather than relying on pre-established institutional legitimacy. Importantly, contemporary educational theory emphasizes that the weakening of traditional authority does not entail its elimination. Rather, it signals its transformation. Modern pedagogical authority distances itself from coercive power and hierarchical dominance, adopting instead a relational, ethical, and professional character (Gauchet, 2008). As Biesta (2013) argues, educational authority acquires meaning only when it is oriented toward the formation of subjectivity, responsibility, and educational encounter, rather than mere control, performance, or efficiency.

Within democratic educational environments, authority thus emerges as a dynamic and reciprocal process. It is constructed through dialogue, mutual recognition, and shared responsibility rather than imposed unilaterally. Such an understanding allows authority to coexist with freedom and autonomy, without collapsing into permissiveness or relativism. The teacher's authority is reconstituted as a form of professional guidance that supports learning, critical thinking, and civic development, reaffirming the educator's role as a central agent of social and educational continuity (Garapon & Perdriolle, 2000).

3. DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND THE PEDAGOGICAL ROLE

Within democratic educational environments, the role of the teacher undergoes a fundamental redefinition. Authority is no longer understood as domination or unilateral control, but as a form of ethical responsibility exercised within a framework of democratic values. Respect for individual autonomy, equality, participation, and dialogue becomes central to pedagogical practice, reshaping both the aims of education and the professional identity of the educator.

Contemporary pedagogical theory emphasizes that the teacher must consciously distance pedagogical practice from authoritarian and oppressive patterns that undermine the dignity and agency of learners. Democratic education does not seek the absence of authority, but rather its moral and pedagogical legitimization. In this sense, authority functions as a condition for freedom, insofar as it creates the structural and relational space within which autonomy can emerge and be exercised responsibly.

Dialogue occupies a pivotal position in democratic pedagogy. Through dialogical interaction, teachers and students co-construct knowledge, negotiate meaning, and cultivate mutual recognition. This dialogical orientation requires the teacher to engage in continuous self-reflection and professional reflexivity, acknowledging both the provisional character of knowledge and the plurality of perspectives present within the classroom (Theodoropoulou, 2009). Dialogue thus becomes not merely a method of instruction, but an ethical stance toward the learner as a subject of experience and thought.

At the same time, the contemporary teacher is expected to integrate traditional academic expertise with a wide range of transversal competencies. These include digital literacy, effective communication, collaborative skills, classroom organization, problem-solving abilities, and sensitivity toward cultural and social diversity. Such competencies enable the teacher to act as a mediator between knowledge, learners, and society, reinforcing professional authority on ethical and scientific grounds rather than on hierarchical power alone (Edward, 2021).

As Freire (1970) compellingly argues, democratic pedagogy presupposes a form of authority grounded in dialogue, humility, and mutual respect, rejecting both authoritarianism and laissez-faire permissiveness. Within this framework, authority is exercised through pedagogical intentionality and commitment to the educational growth of the learner, rather than through coercion or fear.

Democratic pedagogical authority is therefore relational and dynamic. It emerges from trust-based relationships between educators and learners and is sustained through consistency, fairness, and professional competence. Rather than diminishing the teacher's role, this reconfiguration strengthens educational authority by aligning it with democratic ideals and contemporary social realities, allowing the teacher to function as a morally grounded and socially responsive professional.

4. KEY CHALLENGES AND AXES FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM

The implementation of democratic education requires more than a normative commitment to democratic values; it presupposes concrete structural, pedagogical, and cultural transformations within educational systems. The redefinition of teacher authority must therefore be accompanied by targeted reforms that address the complex challenges of contemporary schooling. Without such reforms, democratic discourse risks remaining rhetorical rather than transformative. The following axes constitute critical dimensions for the effective functioning of democratic educational environments.

4.1 Establishing Clear Normative Frameworks

A persistent misconception equates democratic education with the absence of rules and boundaries. However, democratic freedom presupposes a framework of clearly defined norms and cannot emerge in their absence. These clearly articulated norms regulate behavior, protect rights, and ensure mutual respect. Rules function not as instruments of repression, but as shared reference points that make collective life and meaningful participation possible.

Research indicates that the consistent and transparent application of classroom norms contributes significantly to students' academic engagement and social development, fostering responsibility, self-regulation, and respect for others (Basta, 2016). Within this framework, the teacher's authority is exercised through fairness, consistency, and pedagogical justification rather than arbitrariness or punitive control.

From a democratic perspective, the legitimacy of rules depends not only on their enforcement but also on their intelligibility and moral grounding. When students understand the rationale behind norms, compliance is transformed into responsible participation. At the institutional level, the role of the state remains crucial in providing coherent legal frameworks and curricula that support democratic discipline and safeguard educational practice from fragmentation and ambiguity.

4.2 Cultivating Critical Thinking and Democratic Citizenship

Education is intrinsically linked to the political and social contexts in which it operates. One of the central aims of democratic education is the cultivation of critical thinking, understood as the capacity to question assumptions, evaluate information, and engage in reasoned judgment. Critical thinking constitutes a prerequisite for democratic citizenship, as it enables individuals to move beyond passive conformity toward reflective participation in public life.

Through dialogical pedagogy and problem-centered learning, students are gradually formed into active, informed, and responsible citizens. As Tzolou (2014) argues, education functions as a foundational mechanism for political socialization and civic consciousness. Within this

process, the teacher assumes the role of facilitator of critical dialogue, guiding learners in navigating complexity, uncertainty, and value pluralism rather than providing ready-made answers.

4.3 Redefining Sociality in Contemporary Youth Culture

Contemporary forms of youth socialization are increasingly shaped by consumerism, individualism, and the pursuit of immediate gratification. These cultural dynamics often promote superficial modes of interaction while weakening deeper social bonds and collective responsibility. As a result, sociality is frequently misconceived as unrestricted self-expression detached from ethical and social obligations (Lasch, 1995; Lipovetsky, 1989, 1991).

Democratic education is called upon to counterbalance these tendencies by cultivating forms of sociality grounded in empathy, cooperation, and mutual recognition. Through cooperative learning, ethical discussion, and collective projects, schools can redefine social interaction as a meaningful shared practice rather than a purely individual pursuit. In this context, teacher authority plays a mediating role, guiding the establishment of community-based norms without suppressing individuality.

4.4 Fostering Skills, Talents, and Individual Potential

Another critical axis of educational reform concerns the shift from rigid content-centered instruction toward the holistic development of students' skills, talents, and inclinations. Excessive emphasis on curriculum coverage and standardized outcomes often marginalizes creativity and obscures individual potential. Democratic education, by contrast, prioritizes the recognition of students' uniqueness and the cultivation of their capacities for self-direction and lifelong learning.

Innovative digital tools, project-based learning, and skills-oriented workshops play an increasingly important role in this transformation. When used pedagogically rather than instrumentally, technology can support personalized learning environments that enhance autonomy, creativity and critical engagement.

4.5 Strengthening School–Family Collaboration

Democratic education extends beyond the boundaries of the classroom and requires active engagement with the broader social environment. Collaboration between schools and families enhances educational coherence and reinforces the social relevance of schooling. When parents are treated as partners rather than external observers, educational authority is shared rather than diluted.

Democratic forms of school governance foster transparency, trust, and collective responsibility among all stakeholders. Parental involvement contributes to the circulation of educational values and supports students' academic and social development. As Golfi (2019) demonstrates, democratic school practices combined with family engagement significantly enhance learning outcomes and strengthen communal experience of the educational process.

5. THE TEACHER AS GUIDE AND CO-LEARNER

The reconceptualization of pedagogical authority culminates in the emergence of a renewed professional identity: the teacher as guide and co-learner. There is also an additional role as facilitator in democratic education. The teacher is no longer positioned above learners as an unquestionable authority, but alongside them as a reflective professional who facilitates learning, critical inquiry, and personal growth.

This model of authority does not negate the teacher's expertise or institutional responsibility. On the contrary, it presupposes a high level of scientific knowledge, pedagogical competence, and ethical awareness. Authority is exercised through guidance, orientation, and the creation of meaningful learning conditions, rather than through control or coercion. In this sense, pedagogical authority becomes purposive, oriented toward the educational good of the learner (Theodoropoulou & Carvalho, 2014).

Fundamental to this professional role is the cultivation of trust-based relationships. Trust constitutes the foundation upon which dialogue, cooperation, and mutual respect are built. When students perceive the teacher as a reliable, consistent, and ethically grounded professional, authority is legitimized through interpersonal recognition rather than institutional enforcement. This form of legitimacy strengthens the pedagogical relationship and enhances students' engagement with the learning process (Theodoridis, 2020).

The notion of the teacher as co-learner further reflects an acknowledgment of the evolving and contingent nature of knowledge. In an era marked by rapid social, cultural, and technological change, educators can no longer rely solely on fixed bodies of knowledge or stable pedagogical routines. Continuous professional development, critical self-reflection, and openness to learning alongside students become essential components of professional authority rather than signs of weakness.

As Arendt (1961) suggests, education is always situated between the responsibility to introduce the new generation to an existing world and the obligation to preserve the possibility of renewal. The teacher as guide and co-learner embodies this tension, exercising authority not by imposing the world as it is, but by enabling students to engage with it critically and responsibly.

Within a secure legislative and institutional framework, this redefined authority allows teachers to foster creativity, imagination, and collaborative engagement. By encouraging initiative and shared responsibility, the teacher contributes to the formation of autonomous individuals capable of meaningful participation in democratic life.

6. CONCLUSION

Education and democracy are bound together in a dynamic and reciprocal relationship. Education constitutes a foundational pillar of democratic societies, while democracy provides the ethical, institutional, and legal conditions necessary for meaningful educational practice. The quality of one directly influences the vitality of the other.

This article has argued that the contemporary crisis of educational authority should not be interpreted as its decline, but as an opportunity for its reconfiguration. The transition from authoritarian models toward democratic forms of authority reflects broader social transformations and responds to the demands of pluralism, participation, and critical engagement.

By conceptualizing authority as an ethical, relational, and professionally grounded practice, the article challenges reductive interpretations that equate authority either with domination or with its complete dissolution. Instead, it has been shown that democratic education requires authority that is legitimate, reflective, and oriented toward the formation of autonomous and responsible subjects.

Within this framework, the teacher emerges as a key agent of democratic renewal. By embracing dialogical practice, ethical responsibility and continuous professional reflexivity, educators contribute not only to students' cognitive development but also to the cultivation of critical consciousness and civic responsibility. The reconceptualization of the teacher's role as

guide, facilitator and co-learner reinforces the legitimacy of pedagogical authority while aligning it with democratic values and contemporary social realities.

In conclusion, the transition toward a renewed educational paradigm requires the active involvement of educators, policymakers, and the broader educational community. Through sustained dialogue, institutional support, and ethical commitment, education can fulfill its transformative potential and contribute meaningfully to social cohesion and democratic life in an increasingly complex and pluralistic world.

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Data Availability Statement

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