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Teacher's Moral Authority in Classroom: Vitality and building Process

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to explore teacher and his job assignment beyond the realm of duty as in case of any other job. It is also beyond the simple accountability for learner's progress. Rather teacher needs to think in terms of attitudes and personality building besides academic performance. For making it possible he needs to lead from front as a leader in other contexts. Learners follow the teacher only when teacher has moral authority over the learners. Author details on why moral authority is essential for a teacher. The reasons he cites- learners are influenced by teacher's personality, he is a leader in his own right, learners expect from him much more than simply a duty, he needs to inculcate ethics among learners, knowledge needs to be turned a pious entity by him, connections he must develop with learners, he needs to accept diversity, finally moral authority is necessary for moral development and character building of learners. Author presents cyclic process of establishing moral authority over learners. The steps include-presenting compelling vision, becoming confident & connected with learners, should show clear commitment, should have consistent actions to build trust, provide the learner a sense of security, Inspire them to believe in the proposed vision and finally should make the action possible. In the end author also caution against misuse of moral authority of teacher by the institution or even by the teacher himself (intentionally or otherwise). In conclusion author stresses necessity of moral authority of teacher over students for their wellbeing in present and future as well.

Keywords: moral authority, classroom, teacher, teaching, morality

1. Introduction

Teacher is an authority in the classroom by virtue of his/her designation, at least in academic sense. This authority comes by virtue of the role assigned in social framework of occupations. This authority is visible form his powers he experiences in the form of ensuring attendance, maintaining discipline, conducting evaluation and the like. But the same can not be said about non academic matters and least for behavioral and moral domain. It has been observed that acceptability of the teacher is prerequisite even for establishing academic authority. Acceptability depends on establishing relation between teacher and learner. If the relation is moral in nature academic success is inevitable. In a way we are advocating moral authority of teacher as a pre condition for ensuring academic authority in place.

Moral authority is authority premised on principles, or fundamental truths, which are independent of written, or positive, laws. As such, moral authority necessitates the existence of and adherence to truth. Because truth does not change, the principles of moral authority are immutable or unchangeable, although as applied to individual circumstances the dictates of moral authority for action may vary due to the exigencies of human life. These principles, which can be of metaphysical and/or religious nature, are considered normative for behavior, whether they are or are not also embodied in written laws, and even if the community is ignoring or violating them. Therefore, the authoritativeness or force of moral authority is applied to the conscience of each individual, who is free to act according to or against its dictates. Moral authority has to align with the principles of right conduct---right belief, right action, right association with colleagues, right intention toward followers, the right relationship with the community and the planet, and anyone upon whom the leader has an impact. Here in present paper we are assuming teacher in the role of a leader and expecting him to establish a moral authority on his learners. Moral authority of a teacher is not a doctrine in formal sense rather a general principle of ensuring well being of the learner by range of different activities he undertakes.

Why moral authority is vital in teaching

Moral authority is essential for a teacher for both academic as well as behavioral reasons which we can not ignore; some of these are mentioned here.

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Teacher teaches who he is: students remember their teachers not only by virtue of what they taught, rather there are many more reasons which makes a teacher memorable. These other factors are non cognitive in nature, which may include nurturing & caring he exhibits, enthusiasm he expresses, creativity he employs, liberal attitudes he practices and the like. If we look little more closely and in summation we may call it traits of his personality. This personality connection as Parker (n d) explained need to be used to open a new frontier in exploration of good teaching- the inner landscape of a teacher's life. To chart that landscape fully, three important paths must be taken—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual—and none can be ignored. Reduce teaching to intellect and it becomes a cold abstraction; reduce it to emotions and it becomes narcissistic; reduce it to the spiritual and it loses its anchor to the world. Intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on each other for wholeness. They are interwoven in the human self and in education at its best, and we need to interweave them in our pedagogical discourse as well. Moral authority is one instrument by which teacher can dare to open his inner life to the learners and hence achieve sense of credibility and belongingness.

Teacher is a leader: as we are convinced that a leader can only lead if he has moral authority to lead i.e. accepted by the followers on moral measures. Teacher is also a leader in his own right. He is rather a leader who has intimate contact with the follower, i.e. learners, who are watching and interacting all the time. Moral acceptance as a leader empowers the leader to guide the followers in to new territories of human existence which otherwise is impractical. Teacher if has moral authority can go much beyond the realm of academic tasks as it can assume the dimensions like resolving conflicts and moral dilemma, making sacrifices, taking up altruistic ventures and the like. Teacher needs to strive for developing leadership qualities among the pupils as in one form or another they will assume these roles in the society.

Teacher extends his duty: moral authority in classroom not only helps the learner but also helps in turning the teacher in to a selfless worker. By achieving moral authority he turns his job in to service which extends from simply being dutiful employee to a partner in the success of the learner. A teacher having moral authority in class has sleepless nights if one or more of his students are not doing well on learning tasks. He will keep on trying different methods, strategies; specialist help etc. to solve the problems of the learner and ensures him succeed. In this way a teacher sacrifice his every effort in the service of learner and learning. He tries to do something extra whenever possible to exceed the learner's expectations.

Ethics become part of the process: as we know ethics development is one of the targets of education, but when a teacher has moral authority ethics become part of the teaching learning process. Ethics inculcation does not require any special training and learner learns it by virtue of practice rather than acquiring from theoretical perspective. The most objectionable about ethics is the gap between theory and practice among students and general public as well. People do not observe ethics in their routine dealings. Probably to some extent we can attribute the fault with absence ethics as a part of their learning mechanism in school. A teacher teaching in the classroom lacking moral authority causes lack of ethics among learners.

Knowledge becomes pious: in a classroom where teacher experiences moral authority, the means of acquiring knowledge are fair and knowledge itself becomes pious. The whole process of teaching and learning acquire spiritual status. Knowledge by itself is neutral in nature, but could be used positively or negatively as per the ethical orientation. Moral authority of teacher reduces possibility of using knowledge by the learner for negative ends in present or later life. In such a class we do not expect events of intellectual dishonesty by learners. Intellectual honesty and use of knowledge for constructive purposes is the basic need towards building a just society where people can exercise their rights and are committed to their duties.

Connecting with students: in teaching teacher tries to connect with learner and the subject he teaches. Once two connections are built connection between subject and learner becomes automatic. Bad teachers distance themselves from their subjects and in the process they distance themselves from the learners too and the connection breaks. Connectedness demands transparency, openness, accountability and justice oriented dealings which are essential part of establishing moral authority for a leader. Teacher having moral authority in classroom finds so easy to establish connection between learners as well as the subject. One may say that both connectedness and moral authority reinforce each other. Connection helps in building learning communities which keeps the knowledge progressing for good reasons only. As human being has inherent capacity to make community even with dead by following ideology of leaders in the history. People follow Marx, Lenin, Gandhi, Mandela, Lincoln etc. for guiding and evaluating their personal decision; it amounts to making community with them. In the similar veins teacher experiencing moral authority with students can have an eternal connection which invisibly keep on guiding them to remain moral in their dealings.

Acceptance of diversity: accepting of diversity is one of the core values of making education an opportunity for all irrespective of variation in any sense. When teacher has moral authority in the class, by its nature teacher needs to be justice loving, impartial, prejudice free and democratic in outlook. This helps all sorts of students finding place in the classroom without fear of discrimination or rejection. Schools are open to all children irrespective of color, creed, faith or cultural differences. This treatment of equality and equity is only be ensured by teacher in the field. Teacher with moral authority will do the best to entertain the diversity.

Necessary for moral development and character building: moral authority puts the teacher in to a position where he can seriously pursue the moral development and character building which is the highest level outcome of education. Moral development and character building can only be led by a morally sound individual and can not be preached merely by books or scriptures. Moral authority can only be achieved by exhibiting moral conduct and presenting a model for character representation. A teacher with moral authority has every such possibility. In the process of establishing moral authority teacher acquires characteristics essential for moral development and character building which makes him a live example for learners to follow.

Process of building moral authority

Compelling vision: it is learners who make teacher and teaching thrive. They are the reason why teacher has a job. Remember, parents don't always pick an institution based on the best price, they need a vision for choosing a path to travel. A teacher needs to show a compelling vision for finding followers in the form of students. The vision should include students' success as its focus and elements which projects the promise of bringing the best in each of the learner. Compelling vision is based on evaluated learning experiences realizable with available resources and abilities of learners and teacher. It should be known to all concerned and documented as well. Vision should constitute both tangible and otherwise achievable goals. Having a vision alone is not sufficient; it needs to be visualized in terms of measurable objectives in time frame and visible indicators as an evidence for progress towards it.

Confident & connected: teacher need to be confident in realizing the vision at both macro and micro level. He needs to remain connected with learners as well as vision for making the vision clearer. Confidence comes with achieving targets in an honest manner with fair means. A kind of resonance is needed between value set of self and the learners. This creates a sort of symmetry between learner and teacher which makes communication between the two clear and effective. Clear and honest communication is needed to connect with the learners. Connectedness takes the form of intellectual, emotional and in terms of action. Once connected both teacher and learner should be able to connect with the vision they are aspiring to realize. Creating pleasurable, memorable interactions remains a key factor in building and retaining relationships, which we are terming here as connectedness.

Clear commitment: commitment is essential element of moral authority. Learner submits to the teacher when commitment is guaranteed by ideas, actions and procedures adopted inside and outside the class. This commitment needs to be exhibited in presence as well absence of the learner. Commitment of teacher is essential for trust building between learner and teacher. The activities of teacher like-keeping the promise, showing interest in learners as his top priority, supporting the learners' cause, enjoy helping a learner in need, owning even poor performance of learner's, accepting challenge of streamlining every deviant child are some activities which can demonstrate teacher's commitment. Commitment towards learner will make possible commitment towards the vision designed. Commitment is reciprocated by commitment i.e. learners will commit towards teacher as well as the vision designed by the teacher. This will take the teacher a step nearer establishing moral authority over learners.

Consistent actions to build trust: consistent actions are the most reliable source of assuring commitment to the child as well as the vision shown to the child. Inconsistent behavior of teacher can not build a faithful relation and fails in trust building. Transparent evaluation, impartial behavior, well defined rules and procedures, clear parameters of performance, justice based actions and the like are some guiding principles which if repeated with consistency can immensely help in building trust. Trust is pre condition for

establishing moral authority of teacher in the classroom. It is not a blind trust as we see usually in case of pseudo-religious, fanatic and anti social organization where trust is build by illusion, taking advantage of ignorance of the followers and the like. Here trust is evolved based on facts and evidences of common good, even at the cost of personal inconvenience of the teacher. Hypocrisy is biggest hurdle in the process of building trust. Teacher should give straight answers to the questions of learners. It should be natural and not "created" answers just for face saving. This is equally applicable to academic as well as non cognitive contexts.

Security: the natural consequence of the trust is felt security by the learner while interacting with the teacher. Security is directly related to the amount of trust the learner has on the teacher. In case learner feels secured with the teacher s/he owns confidence even in revealing personal feelings. This is big sign of moral authority of the teacher over the learner. Security makes the classroom environment fear free and there is possibility of fair expression of doubts, disagreements, disappointments etc. to present the reality of teacher, learner and learning. Also security guarantees two way communications vital for establishing moral authority of the teacher.

Inspire to believe in the proposed vision: inspiration is the ultimate level of authority in any form of relation, especially in teacher-taught relation. Inspiration makes learner to believe in the proposed vision of the teacher and take it as his/her own vision. The all steps discussed before are necessary to take teacher at a state where he earns the ability to inspire. Inspiration can make anything happen irrespective of its logical possibility. Actually things are possible but they require out of the box thinking or extra ordinary effort which we do not imagine in routine. This is where inspiration makes it possible. When this source of inspiration is teacher he can direct the learner to pursue an action which takes them to the accomplishment envisioned targets. Teacher should choose his words carefully, avoid critical or judgmental comments, guide people in the direction he wants them to go, this will help actions to take place next step in establishing moral authority.

Action: the whole process from inception of a vision to inspiration to believe in the vision results in action to accomplish the vision. Action is a mission through which reality is to be achieved, in terms of learning and behavioral outcomes. In classroom learner takes action to attain learning but in presence of a vision these actions gain much finer meaning than just contents and skills. A teacher with moral authority is instrumental to the action of learners not only for academic achievement but long term outcomes in terms of attitudes and personality building. Education is a multidimensional tool aimed at creating a complete man with holistic development which can not be accomplished by just authority of designation a teacher has. Action caused on the direction of a teacher with moral authority has much greater and comprehensive force to deliver the action for achieving the vision designed as a part of learning as well as establishing moral authority of the teacher. The process of achieving moral authority by a teacher is presented in figure 1, which looks this as iterative phenomena to keep on improving the level of moral authority with each cycle.

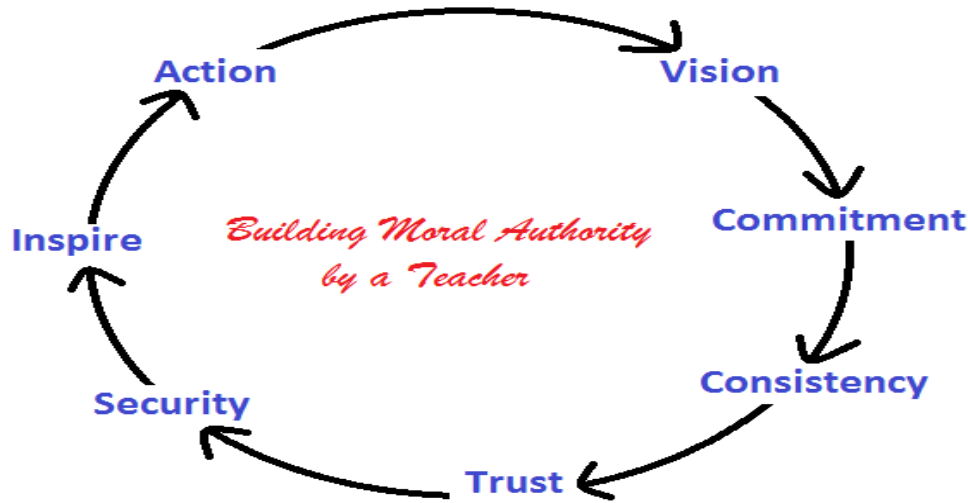


Figure 1: Process of building Moral Authority by a Teacher

Philosophically speaking an essential ingredient of moral authority is that it has the implicit power to transform 'I' in to 'We'; 'problem' in to 'opportunity'; 'work' in to 'mission'; and 'vision' in to 'reality'. The whole process of teaching-learning becomes a noble and pious activity and knowledge becomes a vehicle of change for both individual and communities. Without moral authority leaders cannot lead because there will be nobody who will follow.

Dangers of moral authority of a teacher:

As there is danger of misuse of moral authority by groups or individuals having hidden agenda, there is possibility of misuse of moral authority by teacher here it may be intentional or even unintentional. He himself or the institution may intentionally use his dictate to get a job done from students which otherwise should not be. Moral authority should be a moral business only, to be used for moral purposes to deliver moral outcomes. Moral authority has another danger of being unquestioned authority as learners hesitate to challenge his authority even on academic transactions. This may lead to confusion, doubts and even distortion of facts and concepts. Teacher needs to guard against such possibilities by keeping himself humble, open for discussion & criticism and transparent in dealings. Teacher should choose to have a positive attitude. He may not be able to control all the events that affect learners' lives but he can, however, choose his reactions which justifies his moral authority

Concluding remarks:

Teacher passes through number of phases in his career starting from just able to survive for thirty five minutes of a period in the classroom to experimentation for learners' academic success to ultimately targeting something bigger and so on. For attaining something great teacher can not do simply with subject mastery only, this is where moral authority comes in to play. Moral authority is for making every learning context as moral context and thus turning a classroom in to moral discourse. Whole learning material can be the subject of moral outcomes which is the core issue of education, as we say being educated is being virtuous. He must focus on the learner's needs, should try to add value whenever possible. Moral authority will make things much easier to implement for welfare of the learner as well as learning.

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