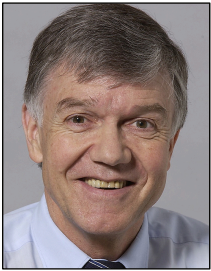


# “New authority” at school! – Excuse me?

by Carl Bossard,\* Switzerland



Carl Bossard  
(Picture ma)

*First, educational authority is frowned upon, and then it returns to the classroom, labelled with the attribute of the “new”. This is happening through the back door and via a private institute. Educator Carl Bossard writes about the slalom course of an elementary concept.*



*“Those who have learnt to lead with mindful authority will succeed in the dynamics of a vibrant classroom.” (Picture ma)*

Above all it must be “new”. Almost everything that is worth its salt is declared to be “new”. This brings applause and acceptance. By many, the “new” is considered to be better and superior to the “old”. It goes without saying that nobody wants to be considered old-fashioned. Education is particularly susceptible to this and therefore also education policy – for fear of no longer being up to date. Anthropological constants are forgotten. Universal concepts are ignored – because we are humans. But human evolution cannot be equated with technological innovation. Yet this is what is happening. Where no reflection takes place, thinking is taken from us with new terms and slogans: “new learning”, for example, or “new learning culture”. Now it is the turn of “new authority”, as it is currently labelled.

## When school quality erodes

“Allahu Akbar”, shouted youngsters from Bern Bethlehem Primary School, closing in on a female teacher. This incident in mid-December 2023 caused a stir. The school in the city of Bern wants to deal with the problem using the so-called “new authority” approach.<sup>1</sup> In Switzerland, this approach has been popularised by the “Systemic Institute for New Authority” (sina) in Zurich. The concept is booming.<sup>2</sup> Schools are booking courses.

The need is great. Burnouts are not isolated cases even among kindergarten teachers. Ac-

ording to insiders, in many places the school system has reached its limits. There is even talk of an “erosion of school quality” and “hullabaloo” in certain classrooms, as the magazine “Der Beobachter” warned some time ago.<sup>3</sup> The “new authority” is now supposed to bring rules and thus more peace and quiet to schools and create “accommodating conditions”. This is what the German sociologist *Jürgen Habermas* demands for good teaching to succeed. The idea of “new authority” goes back to the Israeli psychologist *Heim Omer*.<sup>4</sup> It does not originate from everyday teaching but from family therapy. The concept is based on unambiguous language and the strong presence of parents or teachers as well as setting binding rules.

## Differentiation

### from an authority that no longer exists

So, what is so new about the “new authority”? Unequivocally, empirical teaching research, brain biology and resonance education all call for it. The principles of the “new authority” have long been set out in *Jacob S. Kounin’s* informative study on Classroom Management.<sup>5</sup> Little is new about “new authority”, at least for schools, despite the promising new name. What is more interesting is the delimitation. Authority through power is replaced by a new authority through relationship work, says *Sebastian Teuscher*, principal of Bern Bethlehem Primary School. And he adds emphatically: “Traditional authority has had its day.”

In doing so, he distances himself from authority and “authoritarian persons” as analysed by

\* *Carl Bossard*, 1949, founding principle of the University of Teacher Education Zug. Before that he was principle of the cantonal college in Nidwalden and director of the cantonal college in Lucerne. Today he is active as a course instructor, speaker, and school councillor. Carl Bossard regularly comments on education policies and pedagogy.

philosopher *Theodor W. Adorno* around 1950 and described by *Siegfried Lenz* in his "German lesson". This was authority as a position; it relied on rigorous formal hierarchy, hurting many young people. *Friedrich Torberg's* "Der Schüler Gerber" (Student Gerber) experienced it and tragically failed. *Frank Wedekind* wrote a caricature with his socially critical, satirical drama "Spring Awakening", with the subtitle "A Child's Tragedy". So why construct such distorted images when they have been overcome?<sup>6</sup>

### **Insufficiently prepared for the classroom arena**

Authority is a difficult concept, a "contender for the role of general villain", as the philosopher *Hans Blumenberg* puts it. You don't just *have* authority; it is either granted to you or not. Personal authority is a relationship, a kind of trust, and is essential in the classroom arena and in the tougher everyday educational environment. Leadership and resilience are required. Some young teachers are inadequately prepared for this and, above all, lack practice. This is demonstrated by the desperate call for "new authority".

This can only be explained by the fact that personal authority, long taken for granted in many places has been pushed aside. The current training at university colleges of education towards individualisation, neglects the consistent leadership of a class. It is said that prospective teachers today no longer primarily lead classes; the concept is individualisation. The teacher is a coach, and in the role of "partner" or "counsellor", accompanying the learners. Co-operative whole class teaching tends to be out, so classroom leadership has become secondary. In any case, the historically contaminated word "leading" has a stale aftertaste.

### **Children are looking for a chieftain**

However, such tendencies misjudge the reality. The assignment of educational leadership must be specifically trained. Neurobiologist *Joachim Bauer* puts it this way: "Children and young people want both: understanding and leadership." These are essential pillars of respectful and efficient teaching. In other words: children want a fair chieftain; they want an empathetic conductor.

The affirmation of leadership in the classroom is linked to a positive relationship with educational authority. A pupil will take more liberties if a teacher has little authority. Respect, as deman-

ded by the "new authority", is linked to personal authority. It is ascribed and requires a vital vis-à-vis: a teacher with positive authority, who navigates in a student-centred manner and regulates behaviour in the classroom with a binding commitment.

### **Teachers are leaders of learning and learners**

Empirical educational research shows that the teachers and their teaching. Their tangible relationship with the children is key. There is no such thing as ingratiation, laissez-faire, or fraternising closeness. Gifted teachers know this. They lead in a firm and relaxed manner, radiating a charming and natural authority. They also have the courage to say no. Respect is felt towards such authorities. It is formed through the attribution of personal and socially humane values. You don't overwhelm a person of respect with noisy assaults à la Bern Bethlehem.

Those who have learnt to lead with respectful authority will survive in the dynamics of a vibrant class. In today's crowded classrooms, this is no guarantee against unruly pupil behaviour, but it is an important preventative measure, well aware that children are looking for a "leader". American educational psychology puts it pragmatically: "Teachers are leaders of learning and learners." Teachers are leaders learning and learners. Anyone who has learnt this elementary tool in basic education does not need a "new authority".

*Translation "Swiss Standpoint"*

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- <sup>1</sup> Nina Fargahi, *An den Schulen boomt die «Neue Autorität»*, in: *Tages-Anzeiger*, 16 January 2024, P.4
- <sup>2</sup> Susanne Balli, «Neue Autorität»: *Ein Konzept macht Schule*, in: *CH Media*, 29 January 2024, P.19
- <sup>3</sup> Julia Hofer, *Tohuwabohu im Klassenzimmer*, in: *Beobachter* 25/2021, P.92
- <sup>4</sup> Haim Omer/Arist von Schlippe (2010), *Autorität durch Beziehung. Die Praxis des gewaltlosen Widerstands in der Erziehung*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. See: Haim Omer/Philip Streit (2016), *Neue Autorität: Das Geheimnis starker Eltern*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- <sup>5</sup> Jacob S. Kounin (2006), *Techniken der Klassenführung*. Standardwerke aus Psychologie und Pädagogik. Reprints by Jacob S. Kounin, edit. by D. H. Rost (2006). Waxmann: Münster/München/Berlin.
- <sup>6</sup> Comp. Roland Reichenbach (2011), *Pädagogische Autorität. Macht und Vertrauen in der Erziehung*. Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer.