

# The Autonomy of Teacher in Philosophical and Social Paradigms of Parrhesia

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Received: December 7, 2015 Accepted: January 6, 2016 Online Published: January 27, 2016

doi:10.11114/jets.v4i3.1340

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.11114/jets.v4i3.1340>

## Abstract

Parrhesia<sup>27</sup> is a certain form of honest and open discourse. Its representative is the one who takes the risk of telling the truth and preaching honesty, regardless of meeting severe consequences. The first section of the following paper presents – on the basis of a set of philosophical works – certain requirements to be met, in order to claim the truth. Part two deals with study results regarding teachers' attitudes toward 'parrhesia', confronted with the reality of Polish school system.

**Keywords:** parrhesia, teacher, education, autonomy

## 1. Introduction

The strictly etymological meaning of 'parrhesia' as a notion comes from the Greek language, acquiring its meaning as simply 'telling everything'. Therefore, it describes a free, honest and open discourse that would be viewed as a way of expressing oneself, determining one's own identity. It can also be closely connected with a particular attitude and choice of a speaker and what M. Foucault highlights when defining the aforementioned notion claiming that it sticks to:

*on one hand to a particular value or moral attitude or - the so-called ethos – on the other hand to strictly technical procedure, 'techne' that is absolutely essential and needful in order to convey an authentic discourse to anyone who actually needs it to define himself as an absolutely powerful subject telling the truth to oneself* (Foucault, 2012, p. 160)

The above definition reveals certain aspects of a parrhesiast functioning as a fully subject that is supposed to meet a few basic conditions of preaching honesty. One of these is honesty and it embraces both the value of truths one claims and its receivers. The classic example of such an approach is a concept of parrhesia represented by Seneca and compiled in a treatise of *Moral letters for Lucilius*. The key element of that can be explored in letter 75, where the philosopher is a conscientious advocate of telling the truth and supporting such view with one's own life. It means that the words that are uttered by a subject and which he identifies, need to find their affirmation in real life and actions in accordance with spread ideas (Seneca Jr., 1998, letter XXV).

One inevitable condition to become a true parrhesiast is one's high authority and recognition as a speaker that everyone would like to hear and, above all, having a possibility to affect his receivers by spoken word. It is inseparably connected with holding a reliable knowledge and a set of personal qualities that not only enables to influence one's receivers, but will also constitute their subjective activity. The supporter of such an approach is Philodemos - a representative of Epicurean school, the author of *The Treatise about Truth* (Peri parrhesias). According to the philosopher, the teacher who preaches the truth and speaks honestly, simply affects his disciples by his own example, and, at the same time, creates an opportunity to create their own, unstrained discourse that becomes not merely their acquired right, but also a kind of obligation. One can detect here a certain duo subjectivity of affection, where both sides have equal right. The additional presence of parrhesia is transparent within two more dimensions of an interaction: we can observe not only a certain shift of the freedom of speech from teacher to disciple, but also formulates the basis for proper relations between the disciples themselves, the relations that are authentic and unconstrained (Foucault, 2012, p. 178-80).

It follows from the above that an attitude promoted by Philodemos has acquired its timeless status and, as such, it is also clearly indicated by today's educational reality. Admittedly, our contemporary psychological and educational concepts assume a duo subjectivity within the relations between teachers and students - where a disciple is given reassurance of freedom of speech and a possibility to express his views openly, but unfortunately what it turns into, is pure fiction (Dudzikowa, 1996, p. 159-170).

Finally, one indispensable condition of preaching the truth is courage, for a parrhesiast takes a certain risk, especially when he claims opinions and views that could be somehow inconvenient for other people. Hence, he has to reconcile himself to the lack of friends, social in favor or final exclusion.

According to M. Foucault, in every democratic society there should be a place for an 'intrepid speaker' (Foucault, 2012, p. 390). It follows that today's democratic system of Poland guarantees every citizen his indisputable right to communicate freely within the public space and to express the views without any risk of consequences. It should regard the teachers as well, because they are particularly supposed to openly raise any difficulty for improvement of its functioning. According to Lech Witkowski:

*Teacher has absolutely no right to see his chances for changing his status into becoming a real authority, without paying due respect to one's personal values and an ability to regain attention from students and admiration due to one's own involvement in the world of cultural values and, above all, any public issues and dilemmas, where courage is essential for taking a stand and halling for one's own self and identity (Witkowski, 2009, p.351).*

## 2. Methodological Assumptions of Own Research

The objective of the following research was to present the teachers' opinions on parrhesia within the Polish educational reality.

The research was conducted paying special attentions to the following issues:

1. Do teachers hold the view that they really claim a ground of a parrhesiast towards the activity of educational authorities?
2. Do teachers constitute a social group that holds any decision-making force?
3. What consequences can meet the attitude of a parrhesiast in today's educational reality? In the following research took part 134 teachers from five schools located in the Cuiavian – Pomeranian province in Poland. The research was conducted in the period from May to June 2014.

The research method was a public opinion poll with the technique of a survey.

The socio- demographic figures regarding the above research were compiled in table 1.

Table 1. The characteristics of questioned teachers.

| Personal and Professional qualities of the respondents | Number of respondents | Total % |
|--|-----------------------|---------|
| 1. Sex   |                       |         |
| A. women   | 122                   | 91,0    |
| B. men   | 12                    | 9,0     |
| 2. Seniority   |                       |         |
| A. 0-5 years   | 36                    | 26,9    |
| B. 6-10 years  | 27                    | 20,1    |
| C. 11-20 years   | 31                    | 23,1    |
| D. 21-30 years   | 29                    | 21,7    |
| E. above 30 years                                      | 11                    | 8,2     |

## 3. The Study Results Analysis

Among the researched one can detect an exceptional unanimity in a perception of educational reality. Nearly all of the respondents (98%) represent the view that the Polish educational system operates within constant reforms and, very often, thoughtless and enforced experiments by the Secretary of National Education (MEN). These, in turn, lead to an aggravated educational collapse.

One asked the respondents if they openly discussed the actions of educational authorities (Table 2).

Table 2. The attitude of researched teachers toward the actions of educational authorities (N=134)

| Category of answers  | Number of respondents | Total % |
|--|-----------------------|---------|
| 1. In spite of consequences they speak honestly                                | 15                    | 11,2    |
| 2. They claim a passive attitude toward the actions of educational authorities | 119                   | 88,8    |
| TOTAL  | 134                   | 100,0   |

Only above 11% of the respondents claim that despite the growing perils of serious consequences, teachers claim the ground of a parrhesiast and openly discuss the headaches of the system and wrong decisions taken by the educational authorities. They hold the view that it always pays when someone raises the burning issues of education and, besides,

such an attitude conduces to living in accordance with your own conscience. This group affiliates teachers who are in favor of reforms and regardless of consequences, they firmly state that it is much needful to become an 'intrepid speaker'.

However, nearly 90% of the respondents share the view that most of the teachers, even if they do not approve the arising situation in a school system, claim the attitude of apathy and humility and do not take any decisive actions, for fear of consequences. Within the above mentioned group, 85% teachers claim that expressing one's opinion can be processed only through an informal discourse, outside school environment, during private meetings. One of the statements below:

*Since too many years the Secretary of Education has been running its experiments in our educational system. In practice, it happens with a total impunity, for the teacher in fear of loosing their jobs, often accept anything just to keep it. Any critical remarks and expressing one's unconstrained view occur only outside school. (contractual teacher, 25 years of seniority)*

The analysis of the respondents' statements both from the first and the second group, almost in every case suggests a sweeping wave of pessimism. It seems that teachers as a social group are dispirited and show a certain frustration with the current educational reality, though at the same time they seem to be much tamed with state of affairs. Why is that?

Well, the above study results pointed to one more aspect. The teachers claim that telling the truth about the headaches of the system is simply pointless. It follows from the lack of possibility to take any measures. Such a fact was highlighted by as many as 76,9% of the respondents.

One asked the above group about any reasons for which, according to teachers' opinion, they can not formulate any moving spirit in education (Table 3).

Table 3. The reasons that stay behind the lack of opportunity to take decisions according to teachers' own view (N=103)

| Category of answers          | Number of respondents | Total % |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|---------|
| 1. Weak occupational group   | 31                    | 30,1    |
| 2. Team conflicts            | 27                    | 26,2    |
| 3. Dead cooperation with MEN | 23                    | 22,3    |
| 4. Fear of consequences      | 20                    | 19,4    |
| 5. Other                     | 2                     | 2,0     |
| TOTAL                        | 103                   | 100,0   |

Among the reasons, 30% of the group point put the fact that teachers are generally characterized as a rather weak occupational group, without any driving force behind the changes. The lack of a charismatic leader is then visible, among whom they could unite in order to provide the changes.

The results are strictly connected with another figures, where 26,2% of the respondents draw their attention to a phenomenon of 'atomization' among teachers. The transparent conflicts within the above social group with the lack of solidarity, lead to a certain fragmentation and the teachers cannot state anything unanimously. Such a situation spoils in turn the implementation of constructive and consistent changes in educational system.

Above 22% of the respondents reminds the lack of cooperation between each other, the Secretary and the government itself. It is hard to question the overall bitterness of the teachers in the field, as we have to take in mind that the attribute to each reform is not entirely made by the educational authorities, nor it is made by any council spheres, because first and foremost the main executive force of these are teachers themselves.

Nearly 20% of the surveyed are totally convinced that teachers are not capable of providing any reforms in education, because when being afraid of serious consequences from the educational authorities, they do not possess enough bravery to tell the truth openly.

A couple of the respondents stressed the weak condition of labor unions and evaluated their actions towards the teaching environment rather critically.

The above study results, in view of the aforementioned attitudes represented by the teachers, may lead to a certain paradox. On one hand, teachers admit that they do not have an open say about the nurturing problems, but on the other hand, they have a deep conviction that such a passive and conservative attitude may be the nature of their actual, much unfavorable situation in a school system. As many as 83% of the surveyed group is fully conscious of the fact that it is no sound opinion on many essential matters that consequently leads to taking decisions and implementing reforms that the teachers do not entirely agree with. By contrast, 17% of the surveyed share the opinion that no attitude has any significance, since teachers do not form any particular power, so that they could achieve their objectives, hardly anybody shows little attention to their problems or these are *politicians who practically take decisions concerning the*

*overall quality of our education* (a graduate teacher, 25 years of seniority). The above results stay then in a certain accordance with the previous figures and clearly suggest the attitude of resignation. Teachers seem totally aware of the fact that there is nothing that can be done. Consequently, there is little sense to take any action in the field. Such a sense of diminishing professional autonomy has been already described by H. Kwiatkowska, who, on the basis of her own research would mention:

*There has been so many negative occurrences within the teachers' environment lately, that a certain critical point has been exceeded which appears as perilous, resulting in a phenomenon of reducing our professional claims and demanding a single answer for what is happening in education. Teacher has been deprived of his visual acuity when it regards to whatever evil both in education and inside his school environment. He has somehow domesticated all those unacceptable decisions on the basis of his fatalistic conviction that one has no influence on the course of events* (Kwiatkowska, 2005, p. 118).

In addition, the study results suggest that according to teachers' view, there is no worth being a parrhesiast, as such an attitude automatically arises several and negative effects (Table 4).

Table 4. Negative effects of claiming an attitude of a parrhesiast (N=134)

| Category of answers          | Absolute value | Total % |
|------------------------------|----------------|---------|
| A. Rejection, persecution    | 87             | 64,9 %  |
| B. Job loss                  | 80             | 59,7 %  |
| C. Conflicts with superiors  | 51             | 38,1    |
| D. Harder working conditions | 26             | 19,4 %  |
| E. Job burnout, stress       | 15             | 11,2 %  |

The respondents could distinguish more categories, that is why the data do not balance themselves

Among the researched, nearly 65% uphold the view that a true parrhesiast is supposed to calculate a possible rejection from their own professional environment. Social rejection could be then a discouraging factor against introducing any changes. The research of H. Kwiatkowska clearly illustrated that if teacher faces an environment that is creative and decides on changes, he will have a wide opportunity to develop. Otherwise, when the group rates peace and quiet as the highest value, the teacher would make his way through torment, not to mention the fact that highly discouraged by his colleagues, he would part with his ideals and finally become the same conformist as the others (Kwiatkowska, 2001, p.5). The fear of social exclusion does not conduce then, any potential for changes.

Nearly 60% of the respondents feel a constant fear of losing their jobs, what is often raised among the teachers: *The one could be excluded from „his own group”. He will acquire the status of a rebel and consequently it will deprive him of any chances to get a new position* (a contractual teacher, 25 years of seniority)

Very many teachers also mentioned several types of consequences including conflicts with the principle, more and more difficult working conditions and, above all, job burnout and stress.

The above consequences of telling the truth soundly could be, according to the respondents, so severe, that it really does not pay to preach honesty. Finally, one of the researched teachers quoted a maxim of Confucius: *The one who trembles the tree of honesty, it is he who receives hatred and insults* (a graduate teacher, 33 years of seniority).

#### 4. Conclusions

The above study results reveal several negative aspects that regard the functioning of Polish educational system. To begin with, one worrisome attitude is the one presented by most of the teachers who regard themselves as passive spectators of transformations. This, in turn, kills every opportunity to improve the situation in a school system. In order to evolve certain changes and air working conditions, one needs what is called a professional solidarity. Unless the teachers create a solid, unified in its articulation of problems social team, they are not capable of confronting the absurdities constantly served by the educational authorities.

The above deliberations unveil another aspect of the issue. Is there still a suitable space, in our democratic society, for an 'intrepid speaker'? There raises another question then, about the real democratization of the school system which, according to the view of the respondents, is nothing than a pure fiction. Therefore, a profound change in educational policies is much required, to the one that will treat teachers as a based on partnership subject which could mold the quality of his school system. Cooperation is indisputably one of the most, if not the most essential requirements of every change. As J. Delors would write, we have never been able to introduce any considerable change of educational system without teachers, or against teachers' will (Delors, 1998, p.25).

Is however the aforementioned problem only restricted to the Polish teachers? I assume, that also in many other school environments around the whole world, there is only a handful of these teachers who easily claim the attitude of a parrhesiast without any fear of consequences from the authorities, only because of making ones own choice.

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