

# Teachers' authority and its implications in student training at Universidad de Sonora

## Autoridad profesoral e implicaciones en la formación de estudiantes en la Universidad de Sonora

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### Abstract

The objective of the study is to describe the meaning of teacher's authority that students at the University of Sonora have, the types of teacher authority links that they recognize, and also explore how such authority is involved in their formation. In the conceptual framework, the concepts of meaning, teacher authority and formation are analyzed. The research was guided by an interpretative approach and the phenomenological method, through the interview technique. The experience that the students of the University of Sonora have with the teaching authority was the starting point of the investigation. The results show the presence of three meanings of teacher authority: power, respect and distinction; and that the types of links established with teachers are based on these meanings, which affect their formation. The study has been resumed, as part of a doctoral research, now focused on the analysis of the implications of teacher authority in the formation of students and the possible relationship of gender stereotypes in both processes (authority and formation).

**Keywords:** Authority, teacher, meaning, formation.

**JEL Code:** I23, I21, I29

### Resumen

El objetivo del estudio es describir el significado de autoridad profesoral que tienen los estudiantes de la Universidad de Sonora, los tipos de vínculos de autoridad profesoral que reconocen y explorar, además, cómo tal autoridad está implicada en su formación. En el marco conceptual se analizan los conceptos de significado, autoridad profesoral y formación. La investigación se orientó por un enfoque interpretativo y el método fenomenológico, a través de la técnica de entrevista. La experiencia que tienen los estudiantes de la Universidad de Sonora con la autoridad profesoral fue el punto de partida de la indagación. En los resultados se advierte la presencia de tres significados de autoridad profesoral: el poder, el respeto y la distinción; y que los tipos de vínculos establecidos con sus maestros se basan en esos significados, lo cual repercute en su formación. El estudio se ha retomado, como parte de una investigación doctoral, enfocado ahora al análisis las implicaciones de la autoridad profesoral en la formación de los estudiantes y en la posible relación de los estereotipos de género en ambos procesos (autoridad y formación).

**Palabras clave:** Autoridad, profesor, significado, formación.

**Código JEL:** I23, I21, I29





## Introduction

In everyday life, the term authority regularly carries a negative connotation, attributable to a certain preconception of the relationship established and characterized by the power of some people over others, laden with hierarchical and controlling practices, which even tend toward arbitrariness and intransigence. In other words, it is a relationship based on the idea of an authority that "... sanctions facts or thoughts that have become established as a right to issue orders from superior to subordinate so that these are complied with" (Federico, 2003, in Carmona and Abreu, 2014, p. 91).

However, authority is a polysemic term whose meaning varies according to the context and disciplinary field addressed. In this work, it will refer to professorial authority in the context of higher education institutions, from a pedagogical perspective.

In recent years, a complex environment has been observed, with technological challenges, socio-environmental crises, limited employment opportunities for university graduates, as well as educational shortcomings in schools. This is closely linked to a series of controversial economic, political, and social challenges that have resulted in the so-called "new normal," affecting educational spaces and dynamics, and apparently also the way professorial authority is conceived and exercised in formal educational systems.

Within this context, several studies focused on the teacher-student dyad (Duarte and Abreu, 2014; Pierella, 2014; Greco, 2007) have observed that authority is associated with a relationship of authorization and recognition of power and/or knowledge, but also of fear. It is in this line of research on the educational process where extreme situations have been identified, ranging from cases where the authority link is expressed negatively in authoritarianism, to those in which the teacher-student relationship lacks recognition of authority. Between these extremes are cases in which such authority arises from a proactive, knowledgeable, sensitive, and committed teacher who promotes constructive pedagogical dialogue, assumes authority in the teaching-learning process, and earns recognition of authority among students through the strength of their word, deeds, and discourse (Greco, 2007; Durán, 2010; Klein, 2011).

Pierella (2014) discusses what professorial authority represents in the university setting. According to the author, it is in the university environment where generations can meet based on the acceptance of their different positions and recognition of equality. Thus, considering professorial authority as a phenomenon where the paradoxes and ambivalences of social bonds are expressed, it deserves to be questioned, especially because in that university world of adults, whether professors or students, future professionals who will join society are being formed. Furthermore, today the figure and role of the teacher seem to be fading. Students know they can access knowledge using the internet, watching tutorials, or reading books, so the role of the teacher in the teaching-learning process tends to be disrupted; it can be said that the teacher's role as an educational authority is in crisis.

In the past, teaching mechanisms were based on reward and punishment; in the 19th century, mass education emerged, and knowledge resided unequivocally in the teacher. However, today educational reforms have focused on placing the student as the constructor of their own learning, with the teacher remaining as a guide of that process. This has led to the weakening of teacher authority and even to its questioning by students, who, taking advantage of technological advances and their command of ICTs, with just a "click" on their phones, can verify the veracity of what the teacher presents in class, an act that may reflect doubt about the teacher's expertise. Hence, managing ICTs to leverage them in the classroom is a major challenge for teachers, especially those of the old school who are unfamiliar with or not updated on these technologies.

Now, in any formal educational system (basic or higher), it can be accepted that the teacher, as the course content leader, is the authority and that this figure holds power in the classroom. However, the question remains of how that power is exercised and whether the teacher is aware of it. Placing these concerns in the university environment justifies the following questions: Is the teacher aware of the role they play in student formation? Are university students still in the formation process and thus in need of guidance? Or is it that universities no longer need teachers?

Regarding the Universidad de Sonora, a review of the Plan de Desarrollo Institucional and the



Derechos Universitarios report reveals weaknesses on the part of teachers and complaints referring to the treatment and abuse of authority between professors and students. These facts justify analyzing the meaning that students and teachers at the Universidad de Sonora attribute to professorial authority, how these meanings could be typified, how they are expressed in pedagogical practice, and how they affect university student formation.

Although the world has changed and information acquisition has become easier through new technologies, this study recognizes that even with these innovative and practical ways of acquiring information, the presence of the teacher — the guide, the subject participating in the educational process who motivates, facilitates, and directs the student in knowledge acquisition — is necessary in the formal education system. However, it is important to analyze how that figure acts in the classroom and how they are perceived by students to identify why they are respected — if that is the case — or why they are feared or ignored.

One of the main problems and goals in higher education is quality and effectiveness, which is approached from different angles and perspectives in various guidelines, laws, and programs proposed by UNESCO, the National Development Plan (PND), and the OECD, some of which are integrated into the Plan de Desarrollo Institucional (PDI) of the Universidad de Sonora (OECD, 2015; OECD, 2012; PDI, 2013-2017; PND, 2013-2018). For example, to address effectiveness and quality issues, different curricular reforms, as well as teacher training, development, and incentive plans, have been proposed. At the same time, in programs designed to motivate teachers, there has been an increased demand for research and management tasks, which seems to have led to neglecting the role of teaching.

On the other hand, what happens day to day in the school experience concerning the intended effectiveness and quality is the expression of the teacher's actions and the site of student formation. Within this context, it is common to blame the teacher when a student fails or performs poorly, assuming the teacher is responsible — perhaps because they are too strict or demanding, or because they are negligent or uninterested in motivating their students to learn. This is often the case in higher education institutions, but there is also positive valuation of professorial authority — those

teachers whose daily actions earn them the title of good teacher, responsible, who teach well, motivate students, etc.

Other aspects expressed in universities include power relations and sexism, both of which can generate abusive power and violence, hindering learning. Some cases have been raised through complaints and reports by affected individuals within Universidad de Sonora's Plan de Desarrollo Institucional (PDI, 2017-2021). Perhaps for this reason, during the 2016-2017 academic year, the need arose to develop an action procedure to respond to gender violence cases at Universidad de Sonora. Thus, the Plan de Desarrollo Institucional (PDI 2017-2021) includes a normative instrument titled *Protocolo para la prevención y atención de casos de violencia de género en la Universidad de Sonora*.

Regarding professorial authority, it can be said that to date, research around sexism and gender violence problems has been scant. The few existing studies focus on student experiences, leaving aside the opinions and experiences of the investigated group — the teachers. Nor is the role or influence of gender stereotypes in the exercise of such authority or in the teacher-student, student-student relationship addressed. Therefore, it is proposed to integrate gender stereotypes into the analysis of professorial authority to identify if and how they are expressed in pedagogical practice, particularly in the student-teacher relationship. As a first approach to this issue, this work is based on the following research questions: What types of professorial authority are present at the University of Sonora? How do university students perceive professorial authority? What types of professorial authority do they distinguish, and how do they value them? The main objective is to analyze the meaning of professorial authority among students at Universidad de Sonora, and the implications of that meaning in their formation.

## Conceptual development

Below are some definitions of the term professorial authority, with emphasis on those elements of these concepts that are used to guide the present study. According to the aims of this research, the concept of professorial authority from studies on authority in the university by Pierella (2014) is



adopted. Pierella states that authority is above all a bond, "...a social and intersubjective relationship, in which it is necessary for at least two people to exist... that implies not only attributes or principles, but recognized principles," therefore, "it only exists if it is received" (De Certeau, 2006, in Pierella, 2014). This concept of professorial authority is considered more relevant because it focuses on that bond involving characteristics of admiration, respect, and leadership, or alternatively characteristics of domination, control, or fear; and it is assumed that depending on which of these prevail, they will influence student formation.

In everyday life, the concept of "authority" is commonly associated with negative aspects of rigorous and strict exercise of command by a person or entity (tyranny, arbitrariness, hierarchy, or despotism). But paradoxically, the Latin origin of the word refers to the verb *auctoritas* (to increase, to grow), meaning 'to help to grow,' a word that relates to the characteristics of a virtuous person who acts in accordance with morality. It is this moral imperative of authority, situated in the educational sphere and in teacher-student interaction, which for the purposes of this research is expressed in three types of authority: moral, pedagogical, and emancipatory. Clearly, these three types of authority differ from hierarchical or arbitrary authority.

Furthermore, Espot and Nubiola (2011), when studying the performance and social perception of the teacher, describe how this figure weaves together characteristics linked to high esteem, solid reputation, or good credit attributed according to performance; in this sense, the word prestige also denotes authority. Thus, a teacher with prestige is someone who cares for their intellectual formation by reading, updating, and reflecting on what is learned. Espot and Nubiola specify that these teachers have been entrusted with the task of educating students, a task predisposed by society, so that the responsibility to bring out the best in each student falls upon them. To carry out this task, teachers need prestige, professional and personal authority that supports their professional work. University teachers need to be aware of the important role they play in their students' formation process.

Another important aspect of authority, according to Cruz Soto (2009), was put forth by Aristotle, who held that authority is sustained by the community

and is coordinated with other activities such as work and virtue, as an indispensable element to guide the destiny of citizens for the benefit of the community: "...whenever someone is superior in virtue and in capacity to perform the best actions, it is noble to follow them and just to obey them. But they must possess not only virtue but also the capacity that makes them fit for action" (Soto, 2009, p. 57). This assertion implies that if a person stands out from others by displaying behavior, aptitudes, values, skills, or abilities—possessing such qualities (fit, confident, and aware of what they do)—it is good to consider them a leader or authority. This Aristotelian precept is also echoed by Gadamer, who states:

*Authority is not the superiority of a power that demands blind obedience and forbids thinking. The true essence of authority lies in its inability to be irrational, in being an imperative of reason, in presupposing in the other a superior knowledge that exceeds one's own judgment. To obey authority means understanding that the other is also the voice resonating from tradition and that authority may perceive something better than oneself" (Gadamer, 2000, pp. 58-59).*

Thus, in this Aristotelian perspective, teachers become the voices of reason who guide students in their formation and are admired for their behavior, values, skills, and dexterity—characteristics that students learn day by day, since these leaders are daily examples in the classroom, and what they say and do impacts students' beliefs and opinions. Undoubtedly, this type of valuation of the teacher and professorial authority leads to reflection on whether it still persists in the current era.

Weber associates authority with domination, which is seen in the superiority of the official school language. He understands it as a state of affairs in which a manifested will ("command") of the "dominator" or "dominators" influences the acts of others (the dominated), so that socially relevant acts take place as if the dominated have themselves adopted the content of the command as the principle of their behavior ("obedience"). According to Weber, there are three types of authority: legal authority (characterized by obedience to established rules); traditional authority (characterized by patriarchal domination, i.e., sanctity followed out of will, tradition, or loyalty); and charismatic authority (characterized by belief or recognition, seen as a duty fulfilled by faith and personal recognition). Based



on these Weberian propositions, it can be said that teachers dominate in the classroom and thus their word should be obeyed by students; also, within this logical thinking framework, the existence of three forms of domination permeating the school space is recognized—one given by normativity, another by belief, and the other by tradition.

Pedagogical authority, according to Zamora and Zerón (2009), implies a teacher-student relationship mediated by knowledge, learning, and culture. The cited authors emphasize that just as a teacher alone is not authority, neither can authority be reduced to a mere strategy by the teacher to be recognized by students; therefore, without knowledge, pedagogical authority does not exist. It is fundamental that the educational relationship between actors be oriented toward student learning. This type of authority distances itself from classroom control tactics that only seek blind obedience; instead, it is built in the daily teacher-student interaction, consciously, clearly, and planfully guided by a reflective and solitary work by the teacher on their own pedagogical practice. From this perspective, professorial authority becomes a social phenomenon constructed in the everyday pedagogical interaction and the daily teaching-learning exercise between students and teachers, which has not changed much in recent years.

In this daily teaching practice, arbitrary authority sometimes appears, which according to Ramo (2005), leads to rejection and rebellion; this type of authority has led to abandoning the exercise of “true authority” as proposed by the old Aristotelian tradition recognizing the leader for their abilities, aptitudes, and moral or pedagogical aspects. But moral authority can also appear, understood as that which implies attitudes, behaviors, and traits of trust that open the way for respect. The teacher earns respect from their students in this way and tends to be a figure to be imitated, conceived as a leader or example to follow by students. According to Rojas and Lambrecht (1998), this type of authority is based on technical knowledge and the ability to design and implement classes with methodologies that capture students’ attention, interest, and motivation; but also on the teacher’s attitudes, behaviors, and personal traits, which provide students with confidence and an atmosphere of tranquility, peace, and civility.

A broader definition of professorial authority

is offered by Giroux and McLaren (1998), representatives of the new sociology of education from a critical perspective, when they propose and define the concept of emancipatory authority. These authors challenge the dominant view of teachers as basically technicians or public servants whose role is to execute rather than conceptualize pedagogical practice. They emphasize that such authority dignifies teaching work by considering it an intellectual practice with respect to its formal characteristics and the nature of the content discussed. They assume that student formation in higher education goes beyond transmission and updating of information, knowledge, and skills for preparing professions and technical skills for the labor market. In addition to the instructional function that the teacher performs in higher education, they play a humanistic, moral, and social role by contributing to the formation of people in values and social norms shared by the tradition and culture of a given socio-historical context. Emancipatory authority is based on the instructional and formative function the teacher plays in the pedagogical process. This authority aims to form individuals within a certain tradition and culture, taking into consideration socially shared values and norms. It is the type of authority expected to be predominant among higher education teachers.

Finally, by gender stereotypes, we understand the role that men and women play in society based on the cultural baggage that establishes, shapes, and gives meaning to a set of ideas, beliefs, and evaluations about what it means to be a man or a woman, based on behaviors, characteristics, and even thoughts and emotions deemed appropriate for each human being, grounded in this network of consensual ideas that trigger gender stereotypes (Díaz and Rocha, 2005).

## Methodological strategy

The informants are students precisely because they have direct and daily contact with university professors and, therefore, in their school experience have lived the professorial authority. The selection of participants considered that they should be informed, communicative, willing to participate, and physically accessible within the university space. Four criteria were considered in relation to these questions: Who has relevant information? Who is more physically and socially accessible? Who is more



willing to provide information? And who is more capable of communicating information accurately? A typological checklist was created to note these desirable attributes of possible informants, deriving four discriminant criteria: 1) being a currently enrolled student at the Universidad de Sonora, male or female; 2) willingness to participate in the interview; 3) regular and consistent attendance to classes; 4) being recognized by peers as responsible, reflective, and critical students. A total of 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Universidad de Sonora students, using the snowball sampling technique, which involves a chain of informants sharing common traits, where each interviewee is asked to recommend another person who, in their judgment, has the desirable attributes for the same interview (Colás, 1998; Hernández, 2006). The sample closed at fifteen subjects due to saturation of responses. All participants were Universidad de Sonora students aged 22 to 26.

The phenomenological-hermeneutic or interpretative approach was used for analysis since this perspective studies the meaning of human experience, is based on descriptions of lived experiences, and works with descriptive language to, through reflection, reveal experience and discover the truths of one's own thoughts. It attempts to discover themes or approaches manifested as illustrations of subjects' perceptions of the world and through them establish interpretative patterns (Buendía, Colás, Hernández, 1998).

Phenomenology is understood as the systematic study of subjectivity (Tesch, 1990, cited in Sandín, 2003), focusing on the individual and highlighting subjective experience (Rodríguez, 1999). Thus, the phenomenological method is used because it centers on how subjects live experiences from their own perspective (Martínez, 2009) and because it is of interest how students signify their conception of authority or rather how they perceive it based on their experiences.

Since the aim is to understand the perceptions and experiences (Buendía, Colás, and Hernández, 1998) that students have regarding the professorial authority of their university teachers, the qualitative interview technique was used because it provides deeper information about people belonging to certain social settings, in a face-to-face encounter with the informant, aimed at understanding the perspectives of the informants, in this case the students, exploring their lived experiences and

lives, all expressed in their own words (Taylor and Bogdan, 1994).

## Argumentation of results

All students participating in the interview expressed a basic idea of what authority is; however, defining it was not easy for them. This was noticeable in the surprised expressions they showed when asked the key questions. The mental image of what authority represents for them was not easy or simple to put into words; yet, when reflecting on this aspect, on how they see it and have experienced it as university students, they concluded that many times they are not aware of what is happening in the interaction or bond with their teachers. As stated in the conceptual framework, drawing on Sennett (1982), for whom the authority bond is almost invisible to the eyes but alive in students' experience; and the ideas from Klein (2011) regarding educational rites.

The results show the presence of meanings of professorial authority related to power, respect, and recognition. These three concepts are associated with the qualities of authority understood as a bond, as specified in the theoretical-conceptual chapter: security, superior judgment, capacity to impose discipline, and the ability to instill fear (Sennett, 1982). For Sennett, the qualities of authority are to have knowledge (superior judgment), to be able to impose discipline and fear. Although these three qualities are reflected in the authority meanings found, the ability to instill fear was related to imposition; and respect was connected to fear of failing or facing the consequences of not complying with rules.

It was found that bonds are built day by day in the interaction processes between professors and students. Another meaning identified was recognition, which at first was considered as distinction and shortly after learning, but upon further analysis of its properties and dimensions, it remained as recognition. In any case, this category is related to the notion of prestige presented in the conceptual framework, focused on bringing out the best in the student. It refers to achieving good learning in the student. Formative aspects began to emerge here, which are better expressed in the bond of professorial authority.

It is important to clarify that this work started with the expectation of finding types of professorial

authority, but during the process of analysis, reflection, and understanding, it was discovered that what was really being sought were bonds, hence the concept adopted from Pierella (2012). We found three types of bonds based on the meanings mentioned, which are: the bond of professorial authority based on power, the bond of professorial authority based on respect, and the bond of professorial authority based on recognition. Like Pierella, it is confirmed that bonds of professorial authority are built daily through various interaction processes between professors and students.

Bonds of professorial authority (BPA) are expressed in education. Depending on the bond (power, respect, or recognition), the implications in education will differ. The implications in education of BPA based on power, respect, or learning can be formative or not. What determines whether BPA implications are formative? According to the interviewed students, power belongs to the teachers, but respect does not always. It is a decision made by the student to establish such a bond based on respect. When this is the case, a BPA based on respect achieves education when combined with learning and the objective of the class (course). The student recognizes the teacher's knowledge, but above all that the teacher knows how to teach and transmit that knowledge, doing so with respect towards the students, motivating them to study and learn.

In the research results, students refer to authority as something negative, but as the interview developed and they were asked to reflect on professorial authority, some derived a negative conception of the term. This perception of authority as negation can be associated with the idea presented by Sennett (1982) in his work on authority: "...a culture that the author needs to reject, a culture worth rejecting, but a culture that the author needs". The meaning of professorial authority has been adapted, rather than changed, to include aspects of comprehensive education. Thus, understanding professorial authority as power, respect, and recognition allowed rethinking in this study the meaning it has in everyday discourse.

## Conclusions and implications

Although the research objective was to find out what meaning today's students have of their

professors' authority, it was concluded that perhaps the discussion is not about professorial authority per se, since by delving into students' narratives and analyzing the interviews interpretatively, it was discovered that authority is associated with and refers to a bond built daily in the pedagogical interaction processes established between professors and students.

More than identifying meanings, this work has allowed reflection on the authority bond privileged by the current educational system between professors and university students—a bond often ignored but always present and with implications for student formation. This way of learning to see professorial authority benefits the institution, students, professors, and the relationship between them, precisely because of its possible implications for the comprehensive education of students pursued by Universidad de Sonora.

It is also necessary to acknowledge the study's limitations, especially the scarce bibliography on this topic, at least in the main libraries of higher education institutions in the region. The few identified studies, mostly available online, are articles about professorial authority research conducted in other countries, mostly referring to basic education. There are very few studies on this topic in higher education, and no studies were found conducted in Mexico. Additionally, the limited time to carry out the empirical work led to focusing the study on only three categories of analysis and considering only students.

Regarding practical, theoretical, and methodological implications related to the topic, it is concluded that practically, the study results can help design intervention programs addressing the issue of complaints filed by students with the Universidad de Sonora's Comisión de los Derechos Universitarios. A course-workshop could be designed and scheduled for professors on the formative implications of professorial authority bonds as a response to complaints about abuse of authority by faculty, as expressed by students to the university rights commission. The objective of this course-workshop would be to raise professors' awareness about the role they play when recognized as authority figures by their students. Different meanings, types of bonds, and how these are involved in the comprehensive education pursued by the University could be presented.





On the other hand, the theory described and analyzed in this work can be added to that of other existing studies in various countries in this research line, focusing on conceptions of professorial authority but now from the perspective of university students in Sonora, Mexico. Thus, it can serve as a reference for future research within and outside the country. The methodological implication would help develop future instruments for researchers interested in the topic, taking into account the three analysis categories: meaning of professorial authority, types of bonds of professorial authority, and implications for student formation, to develop a working instrument such as the semi-structured interview. In summary, this work can serve as a reference for future studies; the topic could even be projected to other settings. Doing so, the meanings can be contrasted with those of students—precisely what is proposed in the ongoing doctoral research, analyzing the same problem from professors' perspective and incorporating other dimensions, particularly integrating gender stereotypes.

Without a doubt, this first approach to the topic of professorial authority from the perspective of students at Universidad de Sonora Mexico, should continue with other educational subjects and integrate other dimensions and contextual considerations. It is important to note that institutional customs influence everyday school life, particularly the teacher-student relationship and therefore the teaching-learning process. These customs involve a social imaginary loaded with representations, ideas, and beliefs affecting both professors and students in their bond present in daily pedagogical processes and practices, whether they are aware of such institutional influence or not. According to Klein (2011), when such customs become routines and predictable, they tend to become rituals that strengthen the teacher's work, which they adopt, adapt, and transfer mechanically into their pedagogical actions, norming their work to such a degree that these become beliefs about what a teacher should do.

It is in these rituals that permeate what a teacher should be and do, where certain forms of professorial authority are configured and consolidated, and where gender stereotypes emerge and become present. In this regard, Cubillas et al. (2016) state that gender stereotypes together with gender identity and ideology permeate discriminatory behaviors based on the differentiation of a person as man or

woman. The author affirms that gender roles and beliefs manifest in the learning process that takes place in social interaction, which is the socialization process where identities of how a man and a woman should be are constructed. The ongoing doctoral research takes up these kinds of proposals to analyze precisely how student formation can be affected by professorial authority through gender stereotypes occurring in the bonds established between teachers and students in everyday educational experiences.

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