

#04

Making change happen!

Marie-Claude Sawerschel
and Chantal Vander Vorst

The Power to Thrive

“The school’s role is to stand against everything that humiliates, subjugates and separates, in order to share what elevates and liberates us” — Philippe Meirieu



Elisabeth Ossola,
teacher
in Geneva

When I was asked to write something about the link between power and my position as elementary school teacher, I first felt a kind of internal pushback. As if assuming my power was already enforcing it too hard. The thesaurus offered me the notion of “ability”, which allowed me to think further.



Luc Delepine,
teacher
in Brussels

The rightful power, based on the freedom to manoeuvre that is essential to ensure that lessons are taught, can work wonders in a troubled classroom. The students feel safe with each other and with the teacher. They can finally learn and show what they are capable of, which fills them with satisfaction. They can work together and help each other. They can participate without fear of being mocked by their classmates or belittled by the teacher. And all this in a relaxed atmosphere where shared laughter strengthens the bond. Rightful power derives great strength from the affection and non-judgemental respect a teacher has for the children in his care.

Complete testimonials at the end of the article

→ Marie-Claude Sawerschel:

In the three previous posts on mental modes and talents, we constantly, yet indirectly, touched upon a permanent component of organizations that is **power**. Power of individuals over others, power of the teacher over the student, of the management over the teachers, of the institution over

the schools, of politics over pedagogy.

Addressing this dimension is a complex task. First, because power is a most polymorphous notion. Secondly, because, as I have just suggested, the effects of this power are as much at the interpersonal and institutional levels, and there-

fore we can no longer be sure that we are dealing with a single concept. Finally, it is difficult because power, in its bare form or out of context, is a notion that, in short, could be considered “neutral”.

Who can imagine a community, a group, a gathering, whether organized or informal, without power



manifesting itself? For the actions of individuals to be directed towards a somewhat collective objective, a form of organization known and recognized by everyone is needed. Every organization is built on roles and, consequently, on decision-making places generally embodied by people. These places can be designated arbitrarily. They are not necessarily conditioned to other recognizable elements such as age, wealth, merit, hereditary lineage, or election, to mention only a few of the most well-known.

I will give a small example to illustrate this. It is by itself insignificant in its consequences, but the repetition of microscopic imbalances in an organization contributes to its destabilization as much as major crises. I was recently invited, with three other speakers, to a debate on a voting issue, and the moderator welcomed me in the recording studio, asking us how we wanted to sit on the podium, either grouped according to the views we were going to argue or, on the contrary, mixed together. This question is about organization, of course, and the power will be with whoever makes the decision. But it turns out that, as a facilitator, it is precisely the task of the moderator to take this decision. She may be younger, less wealthy, less socially empowered, or whatever, but what is certain is that her role places a *de facto* responsibility on her to de-

cide. She has the power because her role, naturally, bestows that power upon her. And the problem, because she does not take on this responsibility, out of modesty, delicacy, shyness, whatever, is that she hinders the organization, delays the action for which we are invited, creates tension between us because if she does not assume the power linked to her status, what she provokes is a totally useless disorder: for us to act, we need to

“Who can imagine a community, a group, a gathering, whether organized or informal, without power manifesting itself ?”

be organised, and someone (or a recognized means) must decide. In this instance, the decision power was not up for discussion, we were not going to dispute it, and the fact that she was putting it into question was a fundamental problem.

That's what I mean in terms of the neutral component of power. Power can be seen as the element which enables an organization to function in the simplest and most efficient way. Etymology says it all: power, from the start, is first and foremost "the ability that puts someone in a position to act". And

there is not much more to say about the nature of power. The problems really begin when power is not assumed by the person to whom it is entrusted or if the person who holds it uses it in a way that goes beyond what it was intended for.

→ **Chantal Vander Vorst:** Yes, indeed. There is a simple rule to keep a balance and avoid any “slippage”: any given responsibility must be accompanied by the right level of autonomy, neither more nor less. The level of autonomy correlates to power, in the sense of the verb “to be able to”: to be able to decide the means and the way to assume full responsibility. Specifically:

Responsibility means that we bear, in front of ourselves and third parties, all the consequences of a decision made and/or action taken by ourselves or others to whom we had entrusted a task.

Power is the ability of an individual to decide on the means they allocate to a task, whether in terms of time, resources (financial/human), search for information, and also their ability to take decisions they fully assume.

In the example you relate, the facilitator did not take her rightful and legitimate power, and the consequences of her choice were carried by the assembly, causing



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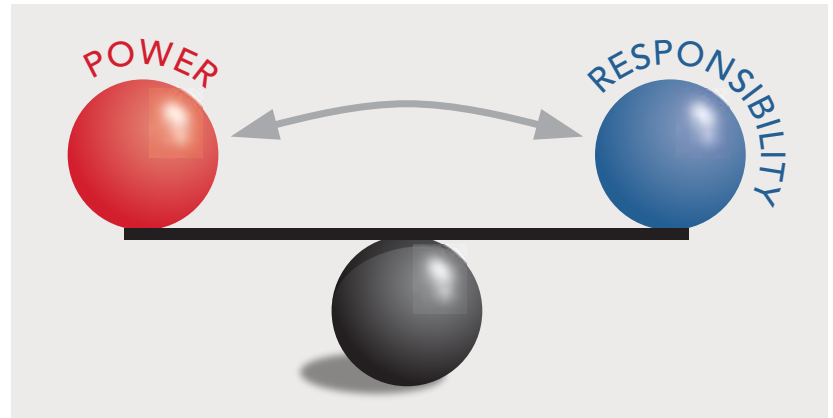
The Power to Thrive, opus 4.

confusion, creating a sense of unease and leading to ineffective action.

Power dynamics

→ **MCS:** I would very much like us to develop this precise aspect of the dynamics of power, understood as the capacity to exercise adequate action, i.e. necessarily regulated or counterbalanced by the notion of responsibility.

We started these posts during the first wave of COVID-19. The schools were closed, and the authorities were trying to set up distance learning. We are now in the heart of the second wave, and new restrictive measures were enacted, but the schools have remained open, with various types of measures (alternating face-to-face/online; quarantining of pupils who have been exposed; simultaneous face-to-face and online sessions for able-bodied pupils and pupils who are ill or in quarantine, etc.). However, the media is currently reporting on the staggering increase in psychological and psychiatric consultations for pre-adolescents, adolescents and young adults. Lack of motivation, loss of purpose, lack of prospects, depression, are the most frequently cited reasons. Blaming the schools for this is of course not my intention, but it seems to me that this situation is an opportunity to better understand how the relationships of power and



"Every responsibility must come with a corresponding level of power."

responsibility are exercised, in normal times, by the different actors of the school system.

→ **CVV:** Indeed, the systemic approach developed by the *Institut de Médecine Environnementale* (Paris) provides a diagnostic tool and the resolution of many dysfunctions. Finding a new balance between the level of responsibility and the corresponding level of power allows to feel better, to exist and to reduce the main symptoms: stress and conflicts.

The principle is as follows: every responsibility must come with a corresponding level of power.

→ **MCS:** I'll stop you right there, because this simple equation gives

rise to a host of examples of situations that are sometimes experienced as insurmountable, when all you have to do is understand that the problem often lies simply in the fact that a given responsibility does not correspond to the level of power that should be attached to it. The federal system we have in Switzerland offers a surprising range of roles and status for a school principal, for example. At one end of the spectrum, there are cantons that consider a principal, and thus his team, or even the entire staff of the institution, as truly autonomous leaders who must decide on the full allocation of budgets, on both pedagogical and administrative IT solutions, on the organization of classes and how they connect or balance each other, etc. And in this case, the level of power given invites the team to assume the kind of responsibilities that make day-to-day decisions exciting and give a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction when met with success. At the other end of the spectrum, on the other hand,



the principal is reduced in some cantons to the role of a passkey for the directorates or political decision-makers, who have set the course of action by means of directives, circulars and regulations. They do not have control over budgets, nor do they have control over the allocation of that budget among the various objectives that an institution should be able to achieve. Hourly allocations are imposed as tables of the law, the range of possible pedagogical models is reduced, as if it could only generate chaos and inequality of treatment between students. The teachers are then almost certainly simple “method facilitators” who sometimes venture, under cover, to use successful teaching methods, which they cannot share. In this “reduced power” scenario, the problem is that the level of responsibility experienced, felt and desired by the actors on the ground who see what should be done is not accompanied by the associated level of power.

I remember this high school teacher who went out on a mission, reaching out to his peers teaching lower grades. The idea was to coordinate with teachers of both levels in the region, to keep everyone closely informed of each other's objectives and expectations, and to collaborate on concrete actions.

The aim was to prevent pupils from forgetting specific knowledge

within a few weeks because it was not explicitly reactivated by the teachers of higher grades. The promising collaboration was to be announced to the governing bodies and monitored as a pilot project that could be extended if successful. Alas. The upper echelons of the hierarchy put the brakes on this

“The problem often lies simply in the fact that a given responsibility does not correspond to the level of power that must be correlated to it.”

initiative, arguing that this undertaking would have generated an “inevitable difference in treatment” with other regions or neighbourhoods. This reluctance, commonplace enough in itself, became absurd when this same teacher, who was sent back to his routine like his colleagues, was invited by his superiors some time later to take part in a working group looking at possibilities for improving the transition of pupils from one level of education to another “because of his great expertise in the matter”. In other words, a team of responsible people (and those whom their status designated as such) were denied power, in this case freedom of manoeuvre even if

controlled by the hierarchy, while recognising that their knowledge and skills pointed to them as potential guides to improving the system.

And then we are surprised that the system is floundering, that students are dropping out and that some teachers are getting frustrated over the years...

→ **CVV:** Yes, this is a very good example of the inconsistency between responsibility and power, and it shows the extent to which such a lack of equilibrium has serious consequences: inertia in the system, demotivation on the part of all concerned, a system that no longer learns. To better understand this mechanism, let's be methodical and start with the symptoms. The grid below is a fabulous tool to diagnose what is going on, and to “set the system straight”.

In the upper right quadrant, the person is in coherence, they have the means to assume their responsibilities. They will feel comfortable, proactive, and this safe space will allow them to experiment without fear.

The upper left quadrant is uncomfortable: the person has to assume responsibilities, for which they do not have all the means, not all the required power. This incoherence is often experienced in the body through intense stress, an uncomfortable feeling, the fear of not



being able to do it, the fear of being punished, a sort of inertia, because “we don’t know what will fall on our heads”. A prolonged situation like this is bad for health.

This is a systemic approach, which means that if a person is on the top left, there is necessarily someone, for the same responsibility, in the bottom right quadrant. The latter does not suffer, and rarely sees the consequences of their choices or posture.

The fourth quadrant, at the bottom left, is the one to avoid: the person is well present in the system, but they float: they have no power or responsibility and they drop out, with a feeling of uselessness, nullity, incomprehension, and effacement.

Putting it into perspective

We can use this tool to explain the pandemic and the school system, and to shed light on the increasing

number of psychological and psychiatric consultations.

Let’s take an example to illustrate this: homeschooling. This change can be experienced in all four quadrants by all actors in the system.

Governments have decided that “home schooling” is an attractive option to limit the risk of a pandemic. Why not? The problem is not the decision, but the way it is





made. In our diagram, governments sit at the bottom right, leaving the organisation of this system to schools, parents and students. All of them start the adventure at the top left: having to assume responsibilities without having the corresponding level of power. In the best of cases, some schools, students and parents do well, having deployed a system themselves, having energy, having computers, having training in computer tools. But is this really the case everywhere? No, certainly not.

Let's take the example of a student who doesn't have access to a computer, has no quiet place to work, no support to get familiar with computer tools. This student will initially be in the upper left quadrant: they must take responsibility for doing the homework, preparing their folders and succeeding. But they don't have sufficient resources. The consequence? Stress, demotivation, and... stress is a learning inhibitor. The circle is eminently vicious. It is quite possible that this student will fall into the lower left quadrant, and there will be a "school dropout", which is a misnomer, because it is rather "an impossibility to work".

The same scenario occurs for teachers and for parents and, at the end of this year 2020, we are experiencing enormous mental, emotional and physical fatigue.

There are many systems today that have become toxic because of the inconsistency between the levels of responsibility and power, and this is dangerous.

The reference to chemistry seems to me an interesting metaphor. In the toxicological directories, it is stated that "toxicity encompasses all the adverse effects of a toxicant on a living organism." In other words, it is the inherent ability of a chemical substance to produce harmful effects in a living organism, making it a hazardous substance. The adverse effect is related to the dose, the route of intake, the type and severity of injury, and the time required for an injury to occur. An acute effect is felt in a relatively short time (minutes, hours, days), while a chronic effect is felt only after relatively long and permanent exposure periods (weeks, months, years). A local effect occurs at the point of contact, while a systemic effect occurs at a location distant from the initial point of contact.

→ **MCS:** No doubt many systems are toxic because of the inconsistency between responsibility and power. I'm not sure that's more particularly the case today as it was in the past. But there is certainly a gap between the existence of these dysfunctions and the rhetoric of "well-being at work" in the business world and "the student at the centre" in the

"There are many systems today that have become toxic because of the inconsistency between the levels of responsibility and power, and this is dangerous."

school environment. Indeed, I wonder whether this paradox is not rooted in the role of schools itself: the first tension that actively generates power dynamics probably lies in the fact that schools must fulfil the dual goal of developing the individual strengths and talents of students, on the one hand, and on the other do so though one single system for all students. This dual objective creates tensions that are difficult to resolve.

→ **CVV:** Indeed, the entire system is regularly put, or puts itself in a double bind. Gregory Bateson was the first to highlight this mechanism, which creates a lose-lose situation in all cases: a situation in which *"you fail if you do what you are asked to do, and you fail if you don't"*. The famous example: *"Be spontaneous"* illustrates this concept beautifully. The human being will decode this system as a threat, a danger, and it will respond to it with stress. Since stress is a major inhibitor of learn-



ing, the loop is closed, and a third setback will occur. We can illustrate this with our diagram above: an immediate power grab by one person over another, putting the other person in the bottom left box, with no power or responsibility. If this person is armed and assertive, they will not stay in this box, which is far too dangerous, and will move back to the top right in one way or another.

→ **MCS:** As a teacher, I can focus on the development of each student, but I also have to go through the entire curriculum, which is the same for all of them in a given time and, from the ideal of the upper right quadrant, I sometimes slip a bit to the lower right quadrant, leaving some students somewhere on the left half of the matrix. As a principal, I need teachers to be able to make their expectations of students explicit, to provide all the guidance that will enable students to progress, and teachers need to have the autonomy to do that. But all these qualities will be of no avail if these same teachers are late in returning grades to the administration or if they systematically arrive late to class, in which case a call to order will indicate the limits of this autonomy. As head of the Department of Education, I may be concerned to see different educational arrangements in place in order to help students thrive, but I also have to make rules that guarantee the safety of the students and

Testimony of Luc Delepine

“A teacher’s power is very broad and the risks of abuse are real: persecution of a pupil, retribution through bad marks, regular murderous comments, unsuitable and excessively difficult tests, denying support to children who have not yet learnt to mark correctly, grading biased against certain “obstinate” pupils, granting (or not) the possibility to redo a test, handing of excessive or too many disciplinary sanctions... all things against which students have no recourse in practice, as they are impossible to prove.



fairness among them, requirements that can be quite contradictory to the first objective.

Governance, authority and responsibility

→ **CVV:** Indeed, all these examples indicate that an imbalance between responsibilities and power can occur very quickly, and very regularly in an unconscious and automatic way. We are governed by many automatisms that influence our decisions. It is extremely rare, I think, for a person to consciously say to themselves: *“I’m going to take power over this child or this colleague and produce a major dysfunction that will stress the whole community”*. Our mental mechanisms are subtle, deeply rooted habits at the level of individuals and institutions. What is the root cause? We will see later in this post: the way our brain actually functions, and the impossibility for the Automatic Mental Mode to “think systemically”.

→ **MCS:** I also wonder whether systems do not advance precisely by successive readjustments, in constant search of a fragile balance. Just as we drink water to re-establish the homeostasis of our metabolic system at regular intervals, any system must be able to regulate itself, to re-establish its equilibrium at all times. We are constantly affected by external causes, as Spinoza would say, that is to say, they have a real effect on us that inflects our existence, provokes an action on our part, and certainly triggers a sensation or an emotion. If these are negative for us in that they diminish our power to act (the two left quadrants of your matrix), it is important to find ways to get out of them. But in order to do this, that is, to understand that the effect of the action of others on us does not imply pure passivity on our part, the mechanism at work in interpersonal relationships and the nature of their effects on us must be understood. In the model you suggest, the understanding of the



systemic character of the mechanism at work, simple as the rules of a game of Go and as fertile in concrete possibilities is a way of adopting the somewhat “meta” position that allows us to see the situation from the outside and to get out of it. I take a big step forward when, distressed or depressed, I understand that my condition is caused by my boss abusing his power over me and demanding results that the means given to me do not allow me to achieve. Or, as a student, I no longer suffer the despotism of a teacher without recourse if I understand that they are not providing me with adequate information to enable me to do the work required. For Spinoza, this rebalancing will be done, among other things, by understanding what is at stake both in the effects of the world on me and in the reaction that these effects provoke in me, that is, by carefully distinguishing between these two dimensions (the cause and the effects on me). As long as the confusion is not cleared up, I remain unmotivated or depressed without understanding what creates this malaise of mine, attributing the cause to myself in full (I’m not good enough) or attributing it exclusively to the outside (it’s other people’s fault). The analysis is faulty in both cases because it is incomplete, and expecting a solution is unrealistic. I cannot resist quoting: “(...) *I have now gone*

“I take a big step forward when, distressed or depressed, I understand that my condition is caused by my boss abusing his power over me and demanding results that the means given to me do not allow me to achieve.”

through all the remedies against the emotions, or all that the mind, considered in itself alone, can do against them. Whence it appears that the mind’s power over the emotions consists: 1° In the actual knowledge of the emotions 2° In the fact that it separates the emotions from the thought of an external cause, which we conceive confusedly (...)” (Ethics V. On Human Freedom, Proposition XX, Note).

→ **CVV**: We can also look at this in the light of how the brain works. In our first post, we talked about our Mental Modes: the **Automatic Mental Mode**, which is perfect for managing simple and known situations, and the **Adaptive Mental Mode** which allows us to manage complex and new situations, such as the one we are currently experiencing. And yet, change is complicated, even though we are “wired” to be able to handle it. How is this possible? The Adaptive Mental Mode is slower and quieter than the Automatic Mental Mode, which also doesn’t like to change its habits and some-

times desperately tries to control a situation that is beyond its abilities. This inner conflict between the two Mental Modes will cause stress. The Automatic Mental Mode does not think “systemically”, and it is extremely difficult for this part of the brain to think about the far-reaching consequences of an immediate action.

Jacques Fradin and his team at the *Institut de Médecine Environnementale* have described in great detail the different governance systems in our brains. The Automatic Mental Mode is composed of two main drivers:

- The **Emotional governance**, which learns by pleasure/displeasure, and which “contains” values, principles, the primary motivations mentioned in the previous post, intolerances. In short, our entire personal, cultural and educational history;
- The **Gregarious governance**, which manages the instinctive place that one occupies in a group. Widely unconscious, this governance level is one of the great causes of dysfunction, because it is

driven by power, not power “for” the other, but power “over” the other. In case of stress, pressure, destabilization, people with dominance tendencies in them will tend to exercise it upon others. In this system, there is “neither good nor bad”, because dominance can be exercised if people let the behaviour happen. The key? Being assertive, taking one’s stance as equal, preventing slippages.

→ **CVV:** The link with the responsibility/power matrix is that if we were all assertive, if we did not have the “fear of losing” (connection, success, affection, freedom...), if we did not have intolerances, in short, if we were driven by adaptive governance, we would probably not have so many imbalances between responsibility and power.

In terms of species evolution, we are not there yet.

This is why one of the responsibilities that should urgently be taken by governments and schools is the following: to equip all actors (teachers, parents, students, management, governments) with the human being’s “user manual”, with knowledge about oneself and the way our brain works. This would allow for a common language, awareness and fairer and faster decisions and regulations to return to a better balance between well-being and performance.

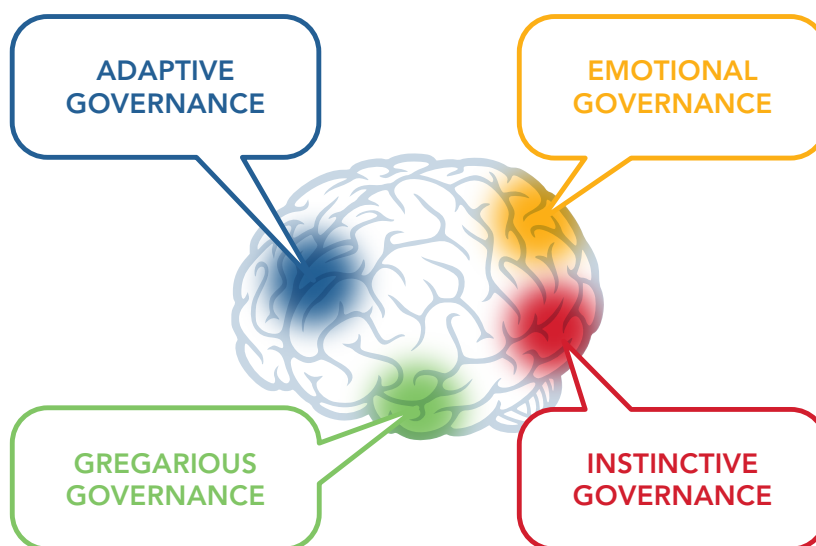
Testimony of Elisabeth Ossola



“**F**or generations, teachers have been handing out “please, Jonathan, be quiet!” and “Margaret, aren’t you interested in what I’m saying?” And here are all these proofs of recognition (negative, but recognition nonetheless) which become engrammed in everybody’s brain, thanks to mirror neurons and repetition, and that corrode the confidence of some, pollute the brains of others and undermine the self-image of the teacher himself. Old, reactive habits that too few come to question.

→ **MCS:** You make the understanding of these cerebral governances the key to an improvement of our systems. Schools must get to it as they would with any other subject, since it is a precondition for providing adequate insight into any type of relationship. Spinoza does not say otherwise. There is a kind of physics of relationships that must be learned, in the same way as the physics of the external world. What you call “the human being’s user manual”. In my view, this understanding

should not be limited to the teaching team. Students, as they grow up, are subjected to these relationships, which they must also be able to analyze in correlation with their cognitive abilities. I am very puzzled, for example, by the fact that we generally begin to address the issue of “self-confidence” in students precisely at the moment when, after having left them languishing for years in the lower left-hand quadrant of your diagram, we realize that they have lost it.





Marie-Claude Sawerschel: after a blissful career in education, I wanted, through Foliosophy, to make place for philosophy, to promote dialogue between disciplines, to understand what we do here, to imagine together how to do better, to reconcile body and mind, space and thought. It is a real joy for me to share in these posts, with the luminous Chantal Vander Vorst, the two passions that have run through my life.

Chantal Vander Vorst: making change happen is the vision of my company, through training, coaching, and martial arts. I am passionate about movement and questioning. These posts started during lockdown with Marie-Claude are a source of reflection and a magical moment of sharing, which we are happy to disseminate.

→ **CVV:** Yes! In the extreme, this would also prevent abuses, such as human toxicity: a person is or becomes toxic if he or she behaves in a way that generates disorder, inefficiency and suffering in a relationship or organization because he or she is exercising power insufficiently or abusively. I think we all have our dark and bright sides, and one of the great quests is to find balance.

→ **MCS:** It is indeed difficult to believe that a person can be toxic out of pure malice. Just as Plato put into Socrates' mouth the idea that no one does evil voluntarily, I dare to think that we most often abuse our power for reasons that escape us, to restore an imbalance that we have not identified. There have been times when I have thought that the ruthlessness of some teachers or leaders is based on a deficit of trust. Lack of faith in others, lack of confidence in oneself. Over-investment on the part of a teacher may be the result of a lack of faith in the pupil coupled with an exaggerated sense of responsibility: anything that helps the pupil make progress must strictly come from the execution of what the teacher asks of him! To enter the realm of knowledge, the student must pass through the eye of the needle that is held out to him! This is an abuse of power (the teacher is clearly in the lower right quadrant), but he doesn't

know it. He himself works hard to give the students the best of himself and what he demands in return is disproportionate or impoverishes the student who must show their credentials by simply duplicating the teacher's word.

It is also not uncommon to observe a reluctance among teachers to collaborate with their colleagues in front of students, as if there were a danger in the possible comparison. However, bringing together classes that are usually separated, mixing age groups and conducting sequences or activities in pairs, showing precisely the difference in approach (in philosophy or in literary analysis, for example) from one teacher to another, and putting it into play in front of and with the pupils, can be very beneficial, and even luminous for the pupils, who understand in such an arrangement the human element, the contribution of the individual to the elaboration of knowledge. Why don't we do this more often? What fear is there underneath? Isn't the collaborative work of various brains the secret of the evolution of our knowledge? Why not stage it as regularly as possible? Beyond the organizational difficulties of such teaching models, there is perhaps the paradox we mentioned earlier and the difficulty of continually ensuring the balance

between power (adequate means of action) and responsibility. A teacher is also an employee who must report to a hierarchy that often fears nothing more than appeals, criticism, anything that goes beyond the framework and automatic mode...

→ **CVV:** Yes, indeed, the big question is: how to get out of this vicious circle?

The first element is the following: becoming aware of emotions, body language and our feelings. Indeed, the instinctive governance system, our inner pilot which specializes in psychological and physical integrity, will alert us to real or perceived dangers through a well-known mechanism: stress. We had mentioned this in our previous posts. Let's look at this in a systemic light. High stress will often be an indicator of "upper left quadrant or lower left quadrant", in other words: responsibility without the corresponding power, or: neither responsibility nor power.

From there, there are two possible paths: engagement or disengagement.

■ **Disengagement** is about giving the consequences of the decision to the person or group that made it.

■ **Engagement** means taking back our own power, nothing more, nothing less.

The avenues you mention are also interesting, and they involve collective intelligence. These practices are becoming more and more known, there are methods and tools, and they are still not widely used in schools. Governments should also be trained in these techniques, both to set an example and to encourage viral change. At present, schools and teachers who use them have to be bold enough not to feel judged, out of step, and at risk of being "behind".

When I train teachers, we often come to the conclusion that the teacher is free to choose their own path within the curriculum and the class. Let's find the freedom to be, to think and to do!

In fact, at the end of this long road around the question of power, we become aware that it's not a big revolution to be made. As is often the case, or as is almost always the case, it is all a question of understanding the mechan-

Basic course "The human being, user manual"

- Who's the pilot? The 4 governance systems
- Stress, that precious indicator
- How to develop assertiveness
- How to develop an open mind
- Discover and experience the magical link between thoughts, behaviours and emotions
- Communicating to soothe

isms that are at play in the relationships between people and in the representation of oneself...

→ **MCS:** Indeed, awareness of mental mechanisms is the key to rightful power and fulfilment. Elisabeth and Luc, whom we quoted in our interview, testify to this in their texts reproduced below: they are very good teachers, not because they are good once and for all, but because they know how to question their practices and their effects permanently and consciously.

→ Foliosophy

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Full testimony of Elisabeth Ossola



“**W**hen I was asked to write something about the link between power and my position as elementary school teacher, I initially felt a kind of internal pushback. As if assuming my power was already enforcing it too hard. The thesaurus offered me the notion of “ability”, which allowed me to think further.

Abilities, yes, I claim them. Consciously. Those brought by almost thirty years of teaching in primary schools, and as many years of coaching teachers-in-training, of reading, of exchanging, of working on myself, of meditating, of laughing, of being alive...

Many skills seem to me to be indispensable in the field of knowledge transmission, and each of them would certainly deserve several entire books. I can mention in bulk and in a non-exhaustive way the ability to define and develop one's teaching philosophy while respecting the prescribed framework, the ability to make the connection and respect for oneself coexist with the connection and respect one has for others and for one's environment, the ability to know and make known one's own psychological and physiological functioning, the ability to question and to adapt the notion of an educational framework, that of increasing

our encyclopaedic and didactic background, etc.

I chose to develop my ability to deal with the need for recognition described by Maslow in his pyramid, because this notion is somewhat the backbone of my power as a teacher.

In the aula, the classroom or the intimacy of a preceptorship, the teacher is automatically the person who has the most indisputable power; because they are in principle the only one to assume this role, because they are often the tallest, the most “knowledgeable” a priori, and because for a long time they were made to work on a platform, just to make things clear.

However, in a very unconscious and primary way, learners, who are in the end simply human beings, have a strong need for recognition (but keep it to themselves). And who better than the teacher, from the top of their material or imagined podium, could bring them the most “remarkable” recognition?

So for generations, teachers have been handing out “Please, Jonathan, be quiet!” and “Margaret, aren't you interested in what I'm saying?” And here are all these proofs of recognition (negative, but recognition nonetheless) which become engrammed in everybody's brain, thanks to mirror neurons and repetition, and that corrode the confidence of some,

pollute the brains of others and undermine the self-image of the teacher himself. Old, reactive habits that too few come to question.

A well-oiled system, conveyed by the collective unconscious and various media, which has often come to be considered inevitable.

I am willing to take power, if it is to reverse this trend. Because I know that when a “bravo” comes out of my mouth, it boosts my self-esteem, generates good hormones in me and my students and activates our nervous systems in a positive way. I know that the congratulations addressed to Karim, who “is focused on what I'm showing”, will automatically lead Sacha, inattentive and restless, to do the same, driven by his need for recognition.

And that is definitely a Superpower...

Full testimony of Luc Delepine

The Rightful Power

I am a math teacher in a disadvantaged school in the upper secondary level. My students are between 15 and 17 years old. The Covid-19 crisis severely disrupted their education, keeping them away from school and in a home where their telecommuting parents could not care for them. The Ministry of Education has recommended not to tackle any new subjects in distance learning courses, which are not happening anyway, because so many teachers are digitally illiterate.

Feeling left to their own devices, some students openly display their independence, encouraging each other to follow their own rules. I took over a class where the norm was for a group of students to speak out loud, turn their backs to the teacher, move around freely, and of course listen to absolutely nothing. At the same time, I saw desperate looks from other students, begging me with their eyes to teach over the din, which is impossible.

I urged them to respect their comrades, I stopped teaching until they were silent again, I asked some of them to switch places, I called their educator to reason with them... to no avail.



So I changed my approach and gave them a choice: either they would participate in the class or they would go to study on their own in a different room. I gave surprise tests. I gave them very low participation scores in the reports they had to show their parents. I have written disciplinary reports that generate a range of unpleasant consequences: calling or summoning parents, detentions when the whole class was dismissed... Let me say here that I had to write a very small number of these reports, because the students talk to each other and quickly understood that I “wasn’t kidding”.

This change in approach triggered a wave of protest: they cried injustice (this is their favourite argument). *“Why me? the others did talk too...”*, *“You have to withdraw this disciplinary report”*, *“Why are you picking on me?”* ...all sorts of arguments that made me waver inside. However, on the outside, I remained unmoved. I explained to them, over and over again, that I was there to teach and not to play policeman. I never backed down, despite their demands and supplications (*“Come on sir, I won’t do it again, I swear!”*). Their attempts faltered in the face of my lack of response. I explained to them that their behaviour had sent them to the person in charge of discipline, whereas I am in charge of teaching. I would like to pay a brief tribute to my colleague in charge of the subject. We worked in

tandem, leaving no way out for these students, who were dreadfully clever at exploiting all the loopholes.

I realised that a teacher has a lot of freedom and therefore a lot of power: from the way they give a lesson, the subject matter to be covered, the time to be devoted to it, the materials given or not given, the exclusion policy, the way of testing or grading... I discovered that within the walls of a school, a teacher’s word carries enormous weight, and that a student who dares to contradict them has no credibility.

It is essential to take or regain this power within a classroom to ensure that the lessons are carried out, for the benefit of the good students, but also of the disruptive ones. Secondly, in every class, it is important to keep reminding students who is in charge and never give them the impression that they are in charge of the class. I get stage fright before the start of every class. I have at times the impression of being in a cage with 23 wild animals, some of which are ready to attack, to exploit any flaw, irritation, emotion... I must constantly demonstrate that I am in charge of the class. Whenever they want to take control, I have to counteract them immediately, often with humour, always with detachment, never with emotion.

To be accepted by all students, this power must be exercised fairly. I

justify all my actions by my goal of teaching. I completely dissociate the assessment of skills (sometimes very good) from the behaviour (sometimes appalling), which throws off the disruptors. I show a great deal of caring by encouraging participation by all, especially disengaged students, which weakens the arguments of disruptors who try to paint a dark picture of the new enemy.

A teacher's power is very broad and the risks of abuse are very real: persecution of a pupil, retribution through bad marks, regular murderous comments, unsuitable and excessively difficult tests, denying support to children who have not yet learnt to mark correctly, grading biased against certain "obstinate" pupils, granting (or not) the possibility to redo a test, handing of excessive or too many disciplinary sanctions... all things against which students have no recourse in practice, as they are impossible to prove. I am constantly reminded of the risk of power going

awry. When I take action, which can happen at any time without warning, I make an instant assessment based on two elements: (1) is my decision related to the objective of teaching the whole class? (OK) and (2) am I under the influence of intense emotions? (NOT OK)

The rightful power, based on the freedom to manoeuvre that is essential to ensure that lessons are taught, can work wonders in a troubled classroom. The students feel safe with each other and with the teacher. They can finally learn and show what they can do, which makes them feel good. They can work together and help each other. They can participate without fear of being mocked by their classmates or belittled by the teacher. And all this in a relaxed atmosphere where shared laughter strengthens the bond. Rightful power draws great strength from the affection and non-judgmental respect a teacher has for the children in his care.