Authoritative Leadership, Action Learning And Student Accomplishment

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Stephen Dinham taught in government secondary schools in NSW before being appointed to the University of Western Sydney where he held a number of positions including Head of the Department of Curriculum Studies, Associate Dean (Postgraduate) and Associate Professor.

In 2002 he took up the position of Professor of Teacher Education, Pedagogy and Professional Development in the School of Education, University of New England.

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He has conducted a wide range of research projects in the areas of educational leadership and change, effective pedagogy/quality teaching, postgraduate supervision, professional teaching standards, teachers' professional development, middle managers in schools, and teacher satisfaction, motivation and health.

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In June 2002, he was appointed to the Interim Committee for a NSW Institute of Teachers and in August 2002, to the Commonwealth Review of Teaching and Teacher Education.

He is a Fellow of the Australian College of Educators, a Fellow of the Australian Council for Educational Leadership, and a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management.

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Abstract

There is a vast body of research confirming the important influence of the classroom teacher on student achievement (see Hattie, 2002, 2003; Mulford, 2006; Rowe, 2003).

A key issue then, is that of how the quality of teaching and learning within individual classrooms can be influenced and improved.

Based upon findings from a range of research projects investigating aspects of quality teaching, I believe that two key, related influences on classroom achievement are educational leadership and teachers' professional learning. This paper concentrates mainly on the former (see Dinham, 2007b for more on the latter).

Educational leadership, like teaching and life generally, is heavily dependent upon relationships. There are two fundamental dimensions to relationships: *responsiveness* and *demandingness* (Baumrind, 1991).

This paper considers the two dimensions in the contexts of parenting, where these were first proposed, and then teaching and educational leadership, where I believe these have equally valid and valuable application.

A postscript considers how responsiveness and demandingness may have shaped and can explain educational change since the early 1960s.

Parenting styles

Different styles of parenting have been the subject of considerable research since the 1960s, with the pioneering work of Diana Baumrind particularly influential (see Baumrind, 1989, 1991). In an earlier paper, Catherine Scott and I considered how models of good parenting could be appropriate models for teaching, and how four parenting and teaching styles might impact upon and help to explain student self-esteem and student welfare practices and programs in schools (Scott & Dinham, 2005).

According to Baumrind, two dimensions underlie parenting style: responsiveness and demandingness. Each considers the nature of the parent–child relationship.

Responsiveness, also described as warmth or supportiveness, is defined as 'the extent to which parents intentionally foster individuality, self-regulation and assertion by being attuned, supportive, and acquiescent to children's special needs and demands'.

Demandingness (or behavioural control) refers to 'the claims parents make on children to become integrated into the family whole, by their maturity demands, supervision, disciplinary efforts and willingness to confront the child who disobeys' (Baumrind, 1991: 62).

By considering the two dimensions of responsiveness and demandingness and whether each is low or high, four parenting styles have been proposed by researchers:

1 *Uninvolved* – low responsiveness, low demandingness;

2 *Authoritarian* – low responsiveness, high demandingness;

3 *Permissive* – high responsiveness, low demandingness, and

4 *Authoritative* – high responsiveness, high demandingness.

In our earlier paper we stated (Scott & Dinham, 2005: 29–30):

> … authoritative parents are high on both responsiveness and demandingness. They are warm and supportive of their children, aware of their current developmental levels and sensitive to their needs. They also, however, have high expectations, and

set appropriate limits while providing structure and consistent rules, the reasons for which they explain to their children, rather than simply expecting unthinking obedience. While they maintain adult authority they are also willing to listen to their child and to negotiate about rules and situations. This combination of sensitivity, caring, high expectations and structure has been shown to have the best consequences for children, who commonly display academic achievement, good social skills, moral maturity, autonomy and high self-esteem.

We argued that an authoritative teaching style where high responsiveness is accompanied with high demandingness provides the best model for enhancing both student achievement and self esteem, and that a pre-occupation with building student self esteem through a permissive approach in the hope that this will translate into student achievement and development is counter-productive. We noted recent research where schools that were successful in facilitating students' academic, personal and social development achieved this through an effective balance of focus on student achievement and student welfare, regardless of whether the school might be perceived by others as being either a 'welfare' or 'academic' school, an unhelpful and damaging false dichotomy (Scott & Dinham, 2005; Dinham, 2005).

In considering the findings of a range of research projects focusing to various degrees on quality teaching, educational leadership (including distributive leadership) and teachers' professional learning (Ayres, Dinham & Sawyer, 1999, 2000, 2004; Dinham, 2002; Dinham, Buckland, Callingham, & Mays, 2005; Dinham, 2005; Aubusson, Brady & Dinham, 2005; Dinham, Aubusson & Brady, 2006; Dinham, 2007a), I believe that the four types of parenting and teaching can be productively applied to educational leadership, given the
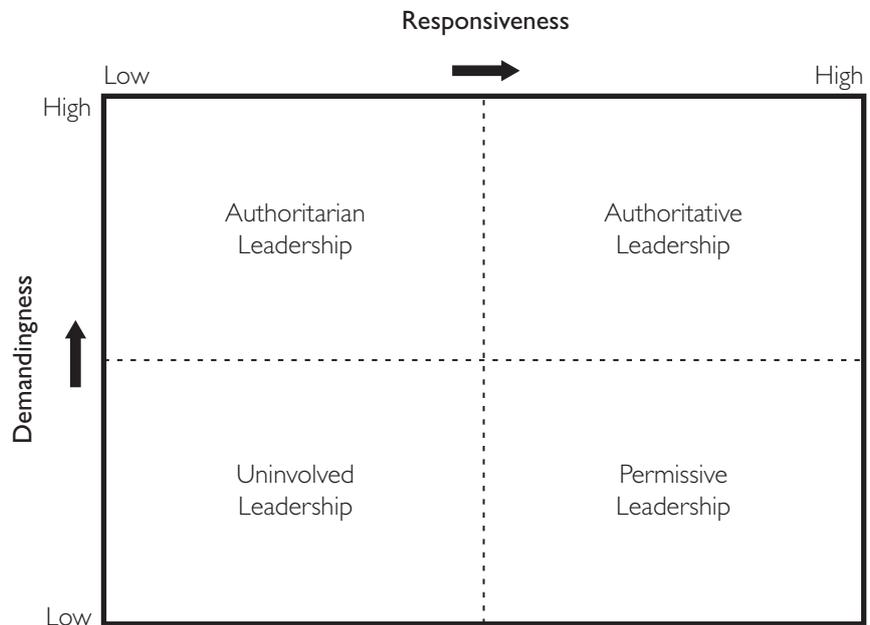

Figure 1: Four Prototypes of Leadership (after Baumrind)

central role of relationships. As with any typology, the four prototypes are 'extremes' unlikely to be found in the ideal form, but assisting in understanding reality.

What might each type of leadership look like, based upon the findings of the above research projects?

Uninvolved leadership

The uninvolved leader is low in both responsiveness and demandingness and practices leadership by abrogation or neglect. He or she makes little impact of a positive nature on the organisation, its performance and its culture. The uninvolved leader can be an effective administrator and may rationalise his or her lack of educational leadership through the piles of papers with which he or she deals. Alternatively, the uninvolved leader may be overwhelmed by his or her situation.

Under uninvolved leadership staff are left to their own devices with few demands made upon them, receiving little direction or support. Positive and negative feedback and recognition tend to be lacking. Students perceive such leaders as remote, and uninvolved leaders tend to have a low profile in the community and wider profession.

Standards and expectations from the uninvolved leader are not clearly articulated and are possibly too low. The resultant inconsistency and uncertainty can lead to confusion, conflict and poor organisational performance.

Insufficient attention and direction may be given to key organisational functions such as planning, policies, recruitment and induction, systems, communication and evaluation. The values and norms of the organisation may be unclear (Schlechty, 2005).

Under uninvolved leadership the organisation is reactive, drifting and possibly sinking. Balkanisation and

groupthink can flourish in this leadership vacuum and sub-groups can push the organisation into dangerous areas. Other leaders and groups may attempt to keep the organisation on course but this is difficult without support from the top.

While good things can happen in individual classes and among teams of teachers, the organisation overall is neither a true learning community nor getting close to reaching its potential.

Authoritarian leadership

Authoritarian leaders are high on demandingness and expect compliance from all concerned. They have a traditional conception of leadership based on obedience and respect for positional authority and status. They tend not to negotiate or consult with staff, students or the community, but expect their orders to be obeyed without question.

Reflecting their low responsiveness, authoritarian leaders focus on procedures rather than people. Because of their use of rules, punishments and sanctions, they may be feared, rather than respected or liked. Recognition and positive feedback from the authoritative leader are lacking, although people may occasionally receive a blast from the leader as he or she reinforces control and authority through pulling people back into line and reminding them who is the boss.

Standards and expectations of the authoritarian leader may be high and reinforced by extrinsic mechanisms. Control, consistency and order are emphasised at the expense of flexibility and compassion.

Schools of authoritarian leaders may be orderly and well run with delegation, reporting and accountability systems utilised to facilitate this. There tends to be a high degree of dependency on the authoritarian leader who has

the final say on everything. Schools led by authoritarian leaders can be characterised by low risk taking and innovation.

There may be considerable untapped potential in organisations led by authoritarian leaders. Staff and students can be infantilised under the authoritarian leader.

Some will appreciate the uncompromising stance and strength of the authoritarian leader, while others will feel stifled and frustrated by their lack of input to the organisation and lack of opportunities to exercise leadership.

Permissive leadership

Permissive leaders are by definition the reverse of the authoritarian leader. They are more responsive than demanding. Permissive leaders may have good people skills and are open and responsive to the needs and wishes of others. Permissive leaders may spend much of their time being available.

As permissive leaders value the input of others, planning and decision making can take quite some time. Permissive leaders tend to use reason and consensus building rather than direction and authority, and the permissive leader may find it difficult to be decisive.

Permissive leaders allow staff and students a high degree of discretion and even indulgence but a lack of direction and accountability can prove counter-productive. The trust and leeway permissive leaders extend to others can be exploited. The permissive leader may demonstrate a reluctance or incapacity to intervene or confront, leaving it to others to work out a solution. Small problems can become bigger under the permissive leader.

Standards and expectations can be unclear, contradictory and too low. The permissive leader is undemanding and may make allowances for those who

transgress or fail to deliver. Again, some will exploit this.

Schools led by permissive leaders may be characterised by organisational looseness and lack of clarity in the application of systems and procedures. There may be a lack of individual and collective responsibility resulting in a degree of disorder and even disobedience and chaos as people 'do their own thing'. The permissive leader may frequently change his or her mind, depending upon the last person he or she has spoken with. Permissive leaders often use covert deals to obtain cooperation.

Some self-directed teachers and groups of teachers will flourish under a permissive leadership regime, while others will drift through lack of direction or worse, avoid responsibility.

While schools led by permissive leaders can be happy, sociable places, this may be at the expense of progress and achievement as the permissive leader attempts to keep everyone on side.

Authoritative leadership

Authoritative leaders share the positive attributes of permissive and authoritarian leaders. They are responsive, warm and supportive. They are sensitive to a diversity of individual and collective needs and are inclusive. They are good listeners and collaboratively build consensus and commitment. They tend to be good networkers with a high profile beyond the school. The personal qualities of the authoritative leader are admired by most, but not always all.

Authoritative leaders are also demanding. They are clear in their expectations of themselves, staff and students. They communicate high standards and set an example that others seek to emulate. They are assertive, without over-reliance on the rules and sanctions of the authoritarian

leader. Authoritative leaders 'give a lot and expect a lot' (Dinham, 2005: 348–351). People say they don't want to let the authoritative leader down.

Authoritative leaders exercise their authority appropriately and in a timely fashion. They know when to consult and when to be decisive. They have the skills to work with others and the courage to act alone.

Authoritative leaders put students and their learning at the centre of the school. They seek ways for every student to experience success and to achieve. They see student welfare as essential to academic success and oversee clear and effective welfare policies and procedures.

Authoritative leaders give timely and appropriate feedback, both positive and negative. People know where they stand with the authoritative leader.

Authoritative leaders place a strong emphasis on professional learning and are prepared to invest in this inside and outside the school. They model professional learning for others. People have the opportunity and encouragement to flourish under authoritative leadership. The authoritative leader seeks to develop competent, assertive, self-regulated staff and students (Dinham, 2005: 352).

Authoritative leaders possess a vision for the future development of the school that they communicate clearly. They tend to have a bias towards innovation and action, and practise distributive leadership rather than mere delegation. Other staff are encouraged, entrusted and supported to develop new programs, policies and practices. The professionalism and capabilities of others are recognised and the authoritative leader is able to release untapped potential in individuals and the organisation.

Authoritative leaders are strategic and realise the impossibility of moving a whole staff forward simultaneously. They are pragmatic and realise that if one waits for everyone to get aboard the bus, it will never leave. They thus empower individuals and groups, hoping for a contagion or groundswell effect. Through influence and action, the authoritative leader moves people out of their comfort zones.

Schools led by authoritative leaders tend to moving and improving through an emphasis on continual evaluation, evidence, planning and action. Even when change is externally imposed, authoritative leaders find ways to use this to the school's advantage.

Overall, authoritative leaders have a positive influence on school climate and culture. Authoritative leaders build leadership capacity and provide for leadership sustainability and leadership succession when they depart.

Authoritative leaders and action learning

As noted, authoritative leadership was a feature of the case study projects. These leaders place a major emphasis on professional learning, both by themselves and others, and had acted in various ways to foster the development of learning communities geared to improvement in educational outcomes.

Action learning, where teachers work together to solve problems and develop innovations, was present to various degrees across the case studies, particularly in the evaluation of the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program (Aubusson, et al., 2005). The development of learning communities in the case studies was fostered by:

Focus on teaching and learning

1. Learning communities have a focus on learning and a desire to learn about learning and teaching; there is use of pedagogic terminology, models and theory, coupled with a conscious effort to de-prioritise administration and management and prioritise learning within the group.

2. Members of learning communities see themselves and their students as going somewhere, with learning being an on-going process; learning becomes contagious, with others catching the 'bug'.

3. Within the group there is recognition that it is necessary to change the way people think if there is to be change in how they act, and thus learning, reflection and questioning are important.

4. Members of the group are concerned with establishing and maintaining upward, continuous cycles of improvement; they are not satisfied with the status quo.

Individual and collective belief and support

1. Group members possess and demonstrate belief and respect for their profession and discipline; they believe in, even love their area and communicate this to others.

2. Members of the group pay attention to social maintenance, trying to make their school, department, or faculty a 'good place' (MacBeath, 2006); members care for each other and their students as people and social and professional relationships are important to group performance.

Problem solving

1. There is an emphasis on problem- or issue-based learning and recognition of what is important, with dialogue about identified issues and potential solutions.

2. Experimentation, risk taking and innovation in teaching and learning

are encouraged and are a feature of learning communities; there is questioning rather than acceptance of constraints.

3. Teaching and learning are context- and person-specific, with efforts to contextualise and modify as necessary externally derived solutions or approaches.

4. There is ongoing reflection on and evaluation of existing and new measures within the learning community, coupled with data-informed decision making.

Internal expectations and accountability

1. The group creates a climate of high expectations and professionalism which members rise to, not wanting to let anyone down, not least students.

2. Members of the group empower each other to take the lead in learning, in turn enhancing individual and group leadership capacity and effectiveness.

3. Accountability is to the group, more than to externally imposed accountability measures; group accountability and self-accountability are powerful influences on the learning community's ethos, and action.

Leadership and outside influence

1. Leadership outside and inside the group is important in stimulating and facilitating the learning community.

2. While learning communities can develop without stimulus or action from above or outside, assistance, guidance, resources and encouragement from others within and in some cases outside the organisation can facilitate the learning process.

Overall dynamics of the learning community

1. Time, place, space and language are important elements in creating a learning community.

2. Overall, what seems to work most effectively is a combination of external understanding, advice, assistance and recognition, coupled with a focus on internal issues and solutions, with teacher and group learning to address these through empowerment and with internal action and accountability.

Conclusion

The above analysis, arising from the findings of a range of recent research projects, is premised on the notion that educational leadership is heavily dependent upon relationships.

> Michael Fullan, a prolific writer on educational change, has noted (2001: 5):
> we have found that the single factor common to every successful change initiative is that relationships improve. If relationships improve, things get better. If they remain the same or get worse, ground is lost. Thus leaders must be consummate relationship builders with diverse people and groups – especially with people different than themselves.

Authoritative leaders are 'relationship' people, able to 'read' and respond to others. They understand people and they understand change, which they help others to appreciate and come to grips with. They are authentic leaders, in that they model those qualities, attributes and behaviours they expect of others. Authoritative leaders rely more on moral than positional authority, and influence more than overt control. In their relationships with teachers and students, authoritative leaders balance a high degree of responsiveness with a high degree of demandingness.

As noted, these leaders place a high priority on professional learning, which they perceive as key to changing people, practices and performance.

In many of the schools visited as part of the research projects cited above (see Dinham, 2005, 2007 in particular), the most telling indicator of the power of authoritative leadership – exhibiting both high responsiveness and high demandingness – was that faculties and whole schools had been turned around with commensurate improvement in student performance indicators. Schools and faculties formerly in decline were now thriving with school leaders having to cope with a new problem of excessive demand for limited student places. In other cases, new leaders took schools and faculties that had plateaued at an acceptable level of performance to higher levels of achievement.

To offer a final cautionary note, the ÆSOP study (see http://simerr.une. edu.au/projects/aesop2.html) cited frequently in this paper – which examined 50 faculties and teams achieving outstanding educational outcomes in Years 7–10 in 38 NSW public schools – found that the turning around and lifting up processes can take around six to seven years to accomplish, although some improvements can occur almost immediately (Dinham, 2005, 2007a).

Those looking for and advocating quick fixes for struggling schools need to consider the intense, coordinated effort and teamwork, and professional learning under authoritative forms of leadership that such improvement requires. However, the evidence is clear that it can be done. As one research participant commented in the ÆSOP study, 'in this school we make plans now, not excuses'.

Postscript – Education from the early 1960s to Today

In the early 1960s education in much of the world was characterised by high demandingness and low responsiveness, i.e., an authoritarian relationship existed between schools and students.

As a wave of questioning of tradition, accepted practices and authority swept the western world, this was reflected in changing thinking in teacher preparation and schooling.

Quite rightly, there was a feeling that schools needed to respond more to students as people and better cater for their individual needs. Teachers questioned established school organisational and teaching practices and over the following decades curriculum prescription and testing gave way to school-based curriculum development and other forms of assessment. Students, like many members of society, began to speak up and engage in various forms of questioning, protest and activism.

Social concerns such as pollution and environmental degradation, racism, sexism, drugs, sexual health and awareness, nuclear warfare, militarism and multi-nationalism found a place in school curricula. Values education became prominent whilst examinations became less so.

As noted, many of these developments were desirable and even overdue. However, a fundamental error of perception occurred at this time that has ramifications to this day.

Put simply, demandingness and responsiveness were falsely dichotomised. Ideologically, it was believed that any increase in responsiveness towards students must be accompanied by, and in fact required a decrease in demandingness:

to be responsive was to be progressive; to be demanding was traditional.

Over time, schools and schooling became more responsive and less demanding of students, i.e., more permissive, with commensurate effects on matters such as standards, expectations, teaching methods and the balance of the curriculum. Other false dichotomies also reflected the polarisation of ideologies in education: knowledge versus skills; process versus subject content; competition versus collaboration, progressivism versus conservatism; subjects versus thematic approaches, and so forth. (Dinham, 2006)

Predictably there has been something of a reaction to this situation in recent times, but the false dichotomising of responsiveness and demandingness remains problematic (Dinham & Scott, in progress).

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