

How schools get moving and keep improving: leadership for teacher learning, student success and school renewal

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There is a vast body of research confirming the important influence of the classroom teacher on student achievement. A key issue, then, is how the quality of teaching and learning within individual classrooms can be influenced and improved. This paper argues that educational leadership is a key influence on the quality of teaching and learning and thus student achievement. Educational leadership is heavily dependent upon relationships, and this paper explores two fundamental dimensions to relationships—*responsiveness* and *demandingness*—and their effects on teaching and educational leadership.

Leadership, teaching and student outcomes

Leadership is seen as central and essential in delivering the change, improvement and performance society increasingly expects of all organisations, including schools.

Because of this perceived importance, leadership has been the subject of both widespread in-depth study and popular writing (see Northouse, 2007, pp. 1–13). What has become clear is that leadership, including educational leadership, is a far more contentious, complex and dynamic phenomenon than previously thought.

The study of leadership has been through many phases and fashions, with various idealistic, empirical, theoretical and even ideological stances: trait versus process leadership; assigned versus emergent leadership; bureaucratic versus charismatic leadership; administration/management versus leadership; transactional versus transformational leadership; universal versus contextual/contingent leadership; ‘born’ versus ‘made’ leadership; command versus relationships; line management versus distributed leadership, and so forth.

Part of the confusion has been caused by the conflation of *leaders* (their attributes, knowledge and skills, i.e., entities) with *leadership* (the influence exercised by and the functions performed by leaders, i.e., processes).

Opinion on the effect that schools, teachers and educational leaders can have on student outcomes has also fluctuated. Until the early 1960s, it was widely believed that schools made little difference to student achievement, which was believed to be largely predetermined by heredity, family background and socio-

economic context (Reynolds, Teddlie, Creemers, Scheerens, & Townsend, 2000, pp. 3–4). In other words, every student had his or her personal glass ceiling on educational attainment.

Later, the various phases of school effectiveness research from the mid-1960s to the present revealed the inputs, variables and processes resulting in some schools being seemingly more effective and successful than others. One of the phenomena so identified was leadership, initially of the principal but more recently perceived as the influence exercised by other formal and informal leaders within and outside the school.

As a result of many studies in a variety of contexts it is now commonly agreed that it is the individual teacher who has most influence on student achievement, with the exception of that which each student ‘brings to the table’ (Hattie, 2003, p. 1; see also Hattie, 2002; Mulford, 2006; Rowe, 2003). Hattie and his colleagues conducted a meta-analysis of more than 500,000 studies and found that the student accounts for about 50% of the variance in educational achievement. Homes can account for 5 to 10%, schools 5 to 10%, and peers 5 to 10%. Teachers, however account for about 30% of the variance in student achievement (Hattie, 2003, pp. 1–2). As a result, there has been a major focus on pedagogy, quality teaching and teacher performance from the late 1980s to the present.

Underestimating educational leadership

Research findings on the influence of school-based influences on student achievement such as those referred to above have led some to conclude that leadership has very little influence on teaching, and little effect on student achievement (e.g., see Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2007).

This view is partly a methodological artefact arising from inappropriate and varying methods being utilised in attempts to reveal the effects—direct, indirect, antecedents, and recursive—of leadership on teaching and student achievement (De Maeyer, Rymenans, Van Petegem, van den Bergh, & Rijlaarsdam, 2007, pp. 125–126, 128). There is also the related problem of definition, with there being literally hundreds of definitions and conceptions of leadership (Northouse, 2007, pp. 1–13). Loose and varying definition makes accurate measurement of leadership effectiveness problematic (Bennett, Crawford, & Cartwright, 2003, pp. ix–x). W. Edwards Deming, the ‘guru’ of total quality management, consistently put the view that ‘the most important measures are both unknown and unknowable’ (e.g., see Deming, 1982). Albert Einstein said something similar.

Teacher effectiveness and performance are equally difficult to define and measure, as evident in the current debate over teacher performance or merit pay. The concept of rewarding teachers on merit is simple and has wide appeal, yet once performance is defined and ‘unpacked’, the issue becomes far from simple (Dinham, 2006). It follows that if defining and measuring teacher performance is difficult, measuring the influence that leadership might have on teacher and then student performance is even more so.

Additional issues with the measurement of leadership effectiveness include the fact that at any time, any leader will be perceived differently by those he or she

works with: some will welcome a new approach, others will cling to the past; some will want decisiveness, others collaboration; what is needed in one situation or part of the organisation will be unsuitable in others. Thus, opinion on any facet of leadership can be polarised or bi-modal (see Scott & Dinham, 2003). In turn, leadership has been found to be the major predictor of teachers' satisfaction with school-based phenomena such as supervision, communication and decision making (Dinham & Scott, 2000).

As noted, school leadership traditionally focused on the principal but today it is recognised that there can be many leaders in a school, including deputy principals, heads of department, program and committee chairs and teachers; it is agreed and seen as desirable that leadership is distributed. Student and community leadership also need to be recognised.

Put simply, in assigning a value to the contribution leadership can make to teacher effectiveness and student achievement, we need to ask which leader or leaders and what aspects of leadership—managerial, administrative, pedagogic, developmental, relational, transformational, school climate and culture, or integrated—we are attempting to quantify.

There is thus a complex dynamic underpinning what happens in classrooms and schools that is both difficult to untangle and which can vary within and between schools and over time.

Despite these difficulties of definition and measurement, I believe that the influence of educational leadership on teacher and student performance has generally been underestimated, and that measured direct effects of leadership, which some researchers have found to be very low, are outweighed by indirect and antecedent effects such as school history, context and organisation, with school climate acting as an intermediate variable between leadership and classroom achievement (De Maeyer et al., 2007, pp. 140, 142).

Two research studies highlighting the powerful influence leadership can have on student outcomes are now explored, the first briefly and the second, a larger study that built upon the first, in more detail.

Following this examination, a framework highlighting the importance of authoritative leadership is drawn from these and other studies.

The importance of teacher learning to student success and school renewal is also considered.

Senior secondary teaching success

In the late 1990s, Paul Ayres, Wayne Sawyer and I undertook a study of successful teaching at the New South Wales Higher School Certificate (HSC) on behalf of the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) (Ayres, Dinham, & Sawyer, 1999, 2000, 2004; Dinham & Sawyer, 2004; Sawyer, Ayres & Dinham, 2001). The NSW HSC is a high stakes combination of state-wide common public examinations and moderated internal assessments which determines university entry in many cases in NSW (Ayres et al., 2004).

Teachers had been identified from confidential NSW Board of Studies and DET data because of their success in helping students perform in the top one per

cent in state-wide HSC examinations over at least a five-year period. These teachers (n=25) were drawn from all subject areas across NSW government secondary (Years 7 to 12) and central schools (Years K to 12). Various external and internal mechanisms were used to select teachers who achieved success both across the state and in comparison to other teachers in their school working with the same students.

Teachers were observed teaching senior classes and were interviewed, as were some of their students, faculty heads, other school executive and fellow teachers. We also spent time in staff rooms and were able to observe these teachers' actions and interactions with students and staff and examine various faculty documents and resources.

While the study focussed on individual teachers, a key finding, apart from commonalities in personal qualities, attributes and actions of these teachers (see Ayres et al., 1999, 2000), was the common view these teachers expressed that their success and that of their students was attributable in large part to the leadership and assistance of their colleagues in faculties and teaching teams. This was more than just false modesty or deflecting praise and was confirmed by other data.

Briefly, individual teacher and faculty success occurred through the faculty working as a team by:

- developing and sharing programs, resources, and teaching ideas;
- setting high professional expectations and creating a positive and demanding faculty climate for all members;
- whole-faculty approaches, consistency and joint initiatives;
- teachers and faculty heads taking the lead on various issues;
- developing a faculty identity within the school;
- faculty HSC success breeding success through attracting talented students and becoming a dominant culture within the school; and
- setting up HSC success in Years 7 to 10 through teaching the 'basics' well and enthusing students about the subject(s) taught by the faculty.

There was whole faculty rapport with students as evident by positive relationships and climate and willingness to refer students to other teachers and to be approached by and help students of other faculty members.

Other faculty features leading to HSC student success included:

- effective organisation and access to resources;
- general sense of enthusiasm, vitality;
- members 'love' and promote the value of their subject(s);
- experienced, confident, up-to-date, well-prepared faculty members;
- aiming to give their subject(s) a high profile within the school;
- faculty-based professional learning led in many cases by staff;
- connection with parent discipline, e.g., visual arts teachers were artists; and
- focus on specific purposes such as the needs of particular students and groups.

We had initially wondered whether the teachers we identified might have been talented loners or isolates but as noted, faculty heads, teacher leadership and team approaches were found to have played major roles in developing the above

phenomena, capacities and outcomes. HSC student success was in many ways a group project.

It should be noted that some of these teachers were in small schools or were teaching subjects where they were the only teacher on staff. In such cases, these teachers tended to form the sorts of collaborative, productive connections outlined above with mentors, teachers in other schools and through active membership and leadership within professional associations and the educational system.

Thus, the HSC study revealed that faculties, teaching teams and shared leadership had a greater than expected influence on the effectiveness of individual teachers and the success of their students at the HSC.

Achieving exceptional student outcomes in junior secondary education

ÆSOP (An Exceptional Schooling Outcomes Project) grew from the previous successful HSC teaching project and was a much larger study funded by the Australian Research Council. It was carried out by staff from the University of Western Sydney, the University of New England and the NSW DET. Unlike the HSC study where the focus was on individual teachers and the HSC (Years 11 and 12), ÆSOP focussed on faculties and teams responsible for producing exceptional student achievement in Years 7 to 10 in NSW public central schools (Years K to 10 and K to 12) and secondary schools (Years 7 to 12).

Rather than concentrating on academic achievement alone, the project defined exceptional educational achievement using the rubric of the three, inter-related domains or principles outlined in the Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century (MCEETYA, 1999). The domains are that schools should: 'develop fully the talents of all students'; attain 'high standards of knowledge, skills and understanding through a comprehensive and balanced curriculum'; and be 'socially just'.

Research sites selected as possibly achieving exceptional student outcomes were of two types: faculties or departments responsible for teaching certain subjects in Years 7 to 10 (approximately 80% of sites), and teams responsible for certain cross-school programs in Years 7 to 10, such as Student Welfare (approximately 20%). Fifty sites were studied in a broadly representative sample of 38 secondary and central schools across the state.

Methodology involved four researchers (two university, two DET) visiting each site (some schools had more than one site/area identified, e.g., Mathematics and Information and Communication Technology across the curriculum, and thus teams were larger).

Visits were usually four days with interviews with the principal, faculty heads, other executive staff, teachers, students and community members and structured lesson observations using instruments derived from previous research (Ayres et al., 1999). Other forms of data gathering occurred through observation of formal and informal school activities and document analysis. Team members were experienced educators and became immersed in the schools, spending hours discussing, theorising and writing structured reports following the school visits.

Once again there were surprises in the findings. The HSC study had revealed the importance of faculties and teams in individual teacher success. *ÆSOP*, a study of faculties and teams producing exceptional student outcomes, revealed the key influence of leadership inside, but also outside these faculties and teams, in creating an environment where teachers could teach and students could learn.

While the *ÆSOP* study was not focussed on the role of the principal, examination of the factors responsible for the success of faculties and teams revealed the influence principals had made and were making to this achievement.

Principals possessed and demonstrated two broad characteristics: they were aware of and responsive to people and events around them, and through high standards and expectations they were demanding, both of themselves and others: they 'give a lot, and expect a lot' (Dinham, 2005). Heads of faculties and leaders of program teams, along with other school leaders, shared many of the characteristics and approaches detailed below (Dinham, 2007b).

Briefly (see Dinham, 2005), these principals were able to foster exceptional educational achievement in Years 7 to 10 through a variety of methods.

External awareness and engagement The principals of the schools with exceptional educational achievement are open to change and opportunity and are outward rather than inward looking; they derive benefits for their schools from being in the forefront of mandated change and develop productive external linkages inside and outside the educational system; they are entrepreneurial and efficiently mobilise community, financial and other support.

A bias towards innovation and action These principals fully use their discretionary powers and bend the rules on occasion. They are often groundbreakers, some appearing to act on the dictum that 'it is easier to gain forgiveness than permission'. They exhibit a bias towards experimentation and risk taking and are prepared to embrace change, even when things appear to be going well. They support others proposing initiatives and are willing to invest money and time whilst risking failure. They empower others, encapsulated in the expression 'let's give it a go'.

Personal qualities and relationships These leaders were found to have positive attitudes that are contagious and they motivate others through example. They realise negativity can be self-handicapping and their positive approach helps the school to keep moving and improving. They demonstrate a high degree of intellectual capacity and imagination, are astute and are good judges of people. They balance the big picture with finer detail and can deal with many issues concurrently. They know when to consult and when to be decisive and courageous. These principals are authentic leaders, exhibiting the values, professionalism and behaviour they expect of others. They are effective communicators and listen to and assist staff. They provide prompt and appropriate feedback both good and bad. They treat staff professionally, provide (and demand) a professional working environment and expect a high degree of professionalism in return. Others 'don't want to let the boss down'. These leaders are generally liked, respected and trusted,

although inevitably, not by all. They demonstrate humour, empathy and compassion and are seen to work for the betterment of the school, teachers and students rather than for themselves, while being unmistakably in control.

Vision, expectations and a culture of success These principals ‘give a lot and expect a lot’. They communicate clear, agreed high standards and take every opportunity to recognise students and staff. They relentlessly ‘talk up the school’ and reinforce where the school is attempting to go. They espouse the power of education for social change and find ways for all students to experience success. Their beliefs and actions help create a culture of continuous improvement and doing one’s best. They pay attention to the physical environment of the school, provide pleasant, tidy facilities and ensure that all graffiti, rubbish and so forth is dealt with promptly. There are displays of student work and other achievements, and teachers and students identify positively with the school, which has earned a good and often rising reputation in the community.

Teacher learning, responsibility and trust These principals place a high value on professional learning, both their own and that of other teachers. They encourage and support teacher learning and fund professional development inside and outside the school. They find ways and means to release staff for professional learning and bring others to the school for this purpose. They recognise that all teachers can be leaders and foster and acknowledge the leadership of others. They ‘talent spot’, encourage and ‘coach’ staff to assume responsibility. Trust is an important aspect of the mutual respect they enjoy with staff, students and the community.

Student support, common purpose and collaboration Student welfare was found to be central in these schools and faculties, and seen as every staff member’s responsibility. The purpose of student support and welfare is not about ‘warm fuzzies’ or boosting self concept but of ‘getting students into learning’. Support from school leaders for student welfare programs and procedures is essential and students clearly understand and support student welfare as something done *for* and not *to* them. Over time, there is an improvement in standards, behaviour and attitude that underpins academic success, personal growth and social cohesion. Many of these principals have found a common purpose to unite the sometime disparate ‘silos’ of the secondary school, e.g., technology, assessment, literacy, pedagogy. Resources are diverted to this priority area and often a champion or team is empowered. Such projects serve to bring the school together. These principals are, however, pragmatic realists, knowing that all staff can’t be moved simultaneously—if one waits for everyone to get on the bus, it will never leave—and thus they concentrate on interested and committed staff and provide them with encouragement, guidance, resources, learning opportunities and support. There is danger in this, in that one can be accused of playing favourites and some staff can be left behind, but the hope is that success will have a contagious effect through the school and bring others on board over time.

Focus on students, learning and teaching This emerged as the core category from data analysis of the 38 school case study reports. Within faculties and the

school there is concern for students as people, and teaching and learning are the prime considerations of the school. There are commonly cross-school approaches to pedagogy, assessment, reporting and tracking of student achievement, with a particular focus on the Years 6 to 7 primary to secondary transition. There is an emphasis on data-informed decision making. There is consistency yet flexibility in policy implementation, with the simple, standard things done well. While some staff characterised this as 'zero tolerance', in reality this was found to be more a case of having clear guidelines and effective communication to ensure that everyone understands procedures and where he or she stands. When needed, compassion and flexibility were evident. In a recent review of research into the effects of leadership on student outcomes, Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (in press) concluded: 'The more leaders focus their influence, their learning, and their relationships with teachers on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes.' Their view resonated strongly with the findings of this study.

While not all faculties and program teams in the study were confirmed as achieving exceptional outcomes, the vast majority were, and while not all principals were found to possess and exhibit the above qualities and approaches to the same high degree, once again, the majority did.

It needs to be noted that the schools in the study covered the socioeconomic and geographic spectrum of NSW; many were not in favoured areas. Rather than just surviving, these schools and faculties were thriving, often in difficult circumstances. In some cases, schools and faculties had been in decline until new principals and faculty heads had been appointed.

It also needs to be emphasised that the process of getting schools moving and improving is a challenging one, taking six to seven years in many of the schools and faculties investigated during the *ÆSOP* project. There are no quick fixes, and creating an environment where teachers can teach and students can learn takes time. These leaders were seen to build on what is there and they possessed a long-term agenda to turn their school around and take it to a higher level.

Within these schools exists a web of distributed leadership with the principal at the centre. This is not just a matter of spreading existing responsibility, but developing additional, dispersed leadership capacity. While principals don't usually teach, they identify and nurture the seeds for change and improvement, releasing latent individual and organisational energy that translates into improved performance in the classroom.

The quantitative data from external examinations and other measures and the qualitative data revealed through the 50 site studies clearly confirmed the dramatic change and renewal that had occurred in many of the faculties and schools. The most obvious evidence of this turning around and improving was in student numbers. Many of the schools had formerly been in decline but had now doubled enrolments, with the school having assumed *de facto* selective status, and with principals having to deal with the politics of turning away potential enrolments at a time when there is a general drift away from government schools across the state.

Leadership by principals and other staff was found to be essential to this process of halting decline, initiating renewal and lifting performance.

Common features of successful leaders: responsive and demanding leadership

Relationships were found to be fundamental to the success of teachers and students in the above two projects. School staff members use their personal qualities and actions to build warm and productive relationships with other staff, students, system officials and community members. These relationships are based upon concern for others as people, mutual respect, professionalism, and high expectations of oneself and others.

The work of Diana Baumrind on parenting styles (see 1989, 1991) provides a useful conceptual framework to understand the effects of leadership on fostering school renewal and student achievement through such relationships.

Previously 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 programs and practices 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' (Baumrind, 1991, p. 62).

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, p. 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:

- *uninvolved*—low responsiveness, low demandingness;
- *authoritarian*—low responsiveness, high demandingness;
- *permissive*—high responsiveness, low demandingness, and
- *authoritative*—high responsiveness, high demandingness.

In our paper we stated:

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. (Scott & Dinham, 2005, pp. 29-30)

We argued that an authoritative teaching style where high responsiveness is accompanied by high demandingness provides the best model for enhancing both student achievement and self esteem, and that a pre-occupation with boosting student self esteem through a permissive approach (i.e., reducing demandingness and increasing responsiveness) in the hope that this will translate into student achievement and development has been counter productive (see Dinham, 2007c).

In considering the findings of the HSC successful teaching study and the *ÆSOP* project, as well as other studies (Aubusson, Brady & Dinham, 2005; Dinham, Buckland, Callingham, & Mays, 2005) the leadership style enacted by effective or successful principals, other leaders and teachers themselves has been found to be both highly responsive and demanding, i.e., *authoritative* in the sense identified by Baumrind (for a profile on uninvolved, permissive, and authoritarian leadership, see Dinham, 2007c; Dinham & Scott, 2007).

How successful leaders manifest responsiveness

In their relationships with others, the successful leaders in the various studies were found to be responsive by:

- being warm, supportive and sensitive to individual and collective needs within the school and the wider community;
- being good listeners and taking an interest in students and staff as people;
- being able to work with a diverse range of individuals;
- ‘giving a lot’ and ‘rolling up their sleeves’ when necessary;
- providing timely and relevant positive feedback;
- identifying and catering for the professional learning needs of staff;
- finding ways for all staff and students to experience success and recognition;
- recognising the capabilities of others, ‘talent spotting’, encouraging, empowering, trusting and supporting staff to develop new programs, policies and practices; and
- seeking to develop competent, assertive, self-regulated staff and students.

How successful leaders manifest demandingness

In their relationships with others, the successful leaders in the various studies were found to be demanding through:

- being confident and assertive, without over-reliance on the rules and sanctions of the authoritarian leader, and pushing the boundaries on occasion;
- having high, clear expectations and ‘expecting a lot’;
- insisting on consistent implementation of policies, rules and procedures and modelling adherence to these;
- providing prompt, explicit feedback when standards and expectations are not met;
- being decisive and even courageous when necessary;

- insisting that teaching and learning is the core purpose of the school and not letting anything get in the way of this agenda;
- modelling and setting a high standard for professional learning;
- challenging and moving people out of their comfort zones;
- adopting and insisting on an approach based on continual evaluation, evidence, planning and action;
- possessing a vision for the future of the organisation, communicating this and adhering to it; and
- possessing and demonstrating moral authority, professionalism and commitment.

Conclusion

No leader can accomplish change and renewal on his or her own and thus the importance of relationships, both personal and professional, cannot be overstated.

The combined effects of high responsiveness and high demandingness in relationships with others places the leader at the heart of the action in the school, where he or she can orchestrate renewal and change.

Change can be mandated or demanded in an authoritarian fashion but it will not be successful in the long term, and much individual and organisational potential will fail to be realised with such an approach. The organisation may rise to a higher level of performance, but runs the risk of plateauing or falling back. Authoritarian approaches do not make for successful leadership succession due to the infantilisation and dependence these leaders engender in staff.

Responsiveness and demandingness skilfully and sensitively exercised by leaders provide the twin forces by which an upward cycle of renewal and improvement can be put in motion. This process takes time and effort and a crucial aspect of renewal in the studies cited in this paper was that of teachers' professional learning. To renew and improve an organisation, it is necessary to change what people know, what they can do and how they think. The leaders in the various studies, both at department and school levels, had worked to create the desired phenomenon of the learning community (see Dinham, 2007a, for elaboration on how this occurred).

It should be noted that some of the aspects of responsiveness and demandingness exercised by leaders are reciprocal. For example, by being responsive through recognising, empowering and meeting the needs of others, leaders create an expectation, desire and even obligation for staff and students to perform at a higher level, with the frequently cited observation that people 'don't want to let [the leader] down'.

On the other hand, demandingness can provide a means of personal fulfilment, accomplishment and self efficacy when staff and students have risen to the challenge of explicit high standards and expectations.

Keywords

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