

Teachers' Leadership in the Classroom: Bridging Theory and Practice in Classroom Management

By Carina Tångring and Stina Öhman

Being a teacher is being a professional and confident leader. This article focuses on teachers' professional leadership as authoritative, trustworthy, authentic, and honest. The authors highlight some skills and strategies necessary for successful leadership that can be learned and developed. They give a theoretical background and bridge the research to classroom practice. Some paragraphs are followed by questions to inspire the reader to reflect upon what has been discussed.

As adjunct lecturers in need of relevant literature for an international course in higher education on leadership, we decided to write this article specifically targeting student teachers at the university and teachers. Our goal was to give a general overview of knowledge and strategies that a teacher can adopt to become a good leader in the classroom. From the perspective of classroom management and nonverbal communication in Swedish schools, we present a reflection on previous research as well as on a shared experience gained from different fields such as schools and universities.

Teachers with good leadership skills are more likely to perform high-quality teaching and to achieve good educational outcomes. Further, teaching is an interpersonal profession that takes place in a social context where relational competence and good communication skills are crucial. The way one communicates verbally and nonverbally will influence how he or she is perceived by people they meet. A teacher's leadership affects the learning in the classroom and, therefore, a good teacher is also a good leader.

Theoretical Points of Departure of Teachers' Leadership The Social Context

The socio-cultural field of research started with Vygotsky's theories about learning as a social process. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) discussed Vygotsky's research and explained that, from originally seeing learning as an individual process, Vygotsky broadened the concept of learning by connecting the individual process to an external process including the society and the social context. Thus, the teacher needs to create a cooperative learning climate in the classroom and should be open-minded and also show interest in the students' lives outside of the classroom. Doing so will shape an atmosphere in the classroom built on trust where students dare to share their knowledge and ask questions without being afraid of giving a wrong answer. Consequently, learning outcomes will benefit from the social context in the classroom. This thinking reflects a paradigm shift that occurred in the early 1990s in the field of classroom management: from an authoritarian and disciplinarian perspective to a motivational perspective focusing on leadership qualities, teaching skills, and learner-centered environments (Randolph & Evertson, 1994).

Illeris (2017) originally focused on learning from a cognitive perspective; however, in his later research, he also connected the cognitive with the individual's own ambition to learn as well as the societal context. He asserted that the interaction between an individual and the environment affects learning: “[...] the more activity and engagement the learner involves in the interaction, the greater the learning possibilities are [...]” (p. 115).

Classroom Rules and Routines

Darling-Hammond (2005) discussed classroom strategies based on Evertson et al.'s 27 classroom observations from 1997. Teachers “who were clear about rules and routines in the first few weeks of the school year had fewer misbehavior problems than teachers who did not make these clear at the beginning” (p. 341). Setting up the rules together with the students to enhance student ownership of the rules is even more effective (Evertson, 2013). Skilled teachers know that one needs to be aware of what is going on in the classroom at all times. Teachers who are effective leaders address problems even before they arise through an alertness to what is going on and whether that is within established bounds. Already in 1977, Kounin called this “withitness,” or rather eyes in the back of one's head, and concluded that teacher behavior affects student behavior as well as learning outcomes. In more recent studies on classroom management by Marder et al. (2023) and Karlberg and Nilsson (2020), the authors highlighted the importance of clear expectations, rules, and routines to encourage positive student behavior.

Relationships and Communication

Hattie's (2012) meta studies showed that establishing and developing relationships with students are important factors for effective teaching and learning. Aspelin used the term “relational competence” (2018, p. 9), which can be seen as a relational bank account where teachers need to make systematic deposits into the relationship account to make students trust them. When teachers are consequent, clear, and predictable, students will also consider them to be fair and just. Because relational competence is practiced in a social context that is both insecure and unpredictable, it is important to understand that each situation is unique. The authoritarian teaching style that dismisses friendly relationships with the students is outdated but can be efficient in certain situations.

Hirsh and Segolsson (2021) set out to analyze what students think characterizes excellent teachers and teaching. They found that the best teachers “seem to interact with and be in constant dialogue with classes as well as individual students, both inside and outside the classroom. They get to know their students and show genuine interest in listening to them and communicating with them” (p. 50). It is central to understand the importance of well-functioning, genuine communication in interpersonal professions such as teaching. Genuine communication is also useful when the teacher needs to act upon problems in the classroom.

Nonverbal Communication

Babad (2008) noted a considerable amount of research published on teachers' nonverbal communication—but also a lack of research on how to apply the results from the studies in teacher training. In the past, training for student teachers has been based on the natural intuition and experience of supervisors rather than academic research. Nonverbal communication can only be understood in the context in which



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it is performed. In Illeris' rather complex learning model (2017), he portrayed how nonverbal communication is a part of the interaction dimension of learning.

Two major research fields within the area of nonverbal communication are “teacher immediacy” and “teacher enthusiasm.” Both fields are, according to the accumulated results, linked to better learning outcomes (Babad, 2008). They describe a successful teacher as someone using good eye contact, vocal variety, gesturing, facial expression, smiling, and moving around while lecturing.

Most studies on nonverbal communication focus on one or two isolated modalities. Gelang (2008), however, instead chose to study the overall nonverbal communication—*Actio*—of lecturers in higher education. According to Gelang, one does not get a fair picture of the optimal nonverbal communication of a teacher by only observing a single modality. One needs to consider the congruence between and among different nonverbal modalities, as well as the congruence between nonverbal and verbal communication. Gelang emphasized the qualities of the action—such as intensity, variation, speed, and timing—rather than the action itself.

Bridging Theory and Practice

Classroom management is a practical skill that is theoretically grounded (Darling-Hammond, 2005). Theory and practical techniques, as well as experience, are all needed to help a teacher make conscious choices in complex situations.

Classroom Rules and Routines

Classrooms are complex, dynamic social arenas, and being a teacher also means being aware of what is going on in the classroom. “Withitness” is a competence of a skilled teacher. While helping a student on one side of the classroom, a teacher must also be aware of what is going on at the other side of the classroom. The teacher needs to be aware if bullying is going on between students through ironic or other small comments, as well as know if a student enters or leaves the classroom. Withitness is more than seeing what is going on; it is also sensing what is going on and being aware of a sudden change of mood and atmosphere in the classroom by observing eyes, voices, and body language.

A lesson includes many unexpected things that a teacher needs to notice and act upon, preferably even before they occur. Skilled teachers handle presumptive disruptive elements smoothly and effectively without disturbing the classroom activity, which helps not only the teacher to control the classroom but also the students to focus. Subtle actions such as signals of bullying, rolling of eyes between students, and more obvious disruptive activities such as students using cell phones or preparing to leave the classroom without permission are other examples of disruptive elements. Withitness, together with democratically formed classroom rules, will help the teacher to act upon unwanted behavior and give the students a chance to apply themselves before failing to act according to classroom guidelines, thus establishing a partnership in learning between the teacher and the students. Such withitness is a key factor to good educational outcomes (Aspelin, 2012).

High-quality teachers also set limits and boundaries and show consequences of unwanted behavior when needed. The doctrine “in loco parentis” means that teachers not only have responsibility for students when they are in school but also that teachers, in a way, substitute for the parents. In Sweden, according to the school law (Skollag/School Law [SFS 2010:800 chapter 1 §2]), teachers have the responsibility not only to teach academic skills but also to foster the students into

becoming active, creative, competent, and responsible individuals and citizens, thus being a part of their identity formation. According to the school law, such character formation should be done in cooperation with the students' homes.

Relationships and Communication

To be able to build authentic relationships, teachers need to express their interest in the students by asking them genuine questions connected to things they like and dislike. Relationships and trust are not only built in the classroom but are also established in corridors, in the schoolyard, and through communication channels such as emails and digital platforms. Conducting small, informal conversations and greeting students with a smile in the corridors are ways to develop good relationships with them. For example, asking a student about the football game last weekend or mentioning having read about the latest release by a certain artist to a student will show that one is genuinely interested in that student and his or her everyday life.

Apart from meeting the students' expectations on high-quality teaching, activities outside of ordinary classes can also help build relationships and provide good opportunities for teachers to learn more about their students. Arranging a movie night at school, going on a field trip, or simply doing fun outdoor activities are examples of time well invested that will strengthen the relationship between teacher and student and will have a positive impact on students' learning. The best teachers genuinely care about their students and connect with them empathetically. Hirsh and Segolsson (2021) wrote:

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What the students describe most frequently throughout the interviews is the importance of a caring and trustworthy relationship between teachers and students. The best teachers try to get to know their students and build relationships with them both inside and outside the classroom. This, in turn, creates a classroom environment where the students feel safe and comfortable to show when they do not understand and where they dare to ask questions. Another aspect often referred to as contributing to the feeling of a safe classroom is that teachers are forgiving: the best teachers never give up on their students and there is always a second chance. They do not compromise on order, rules, and clarity; rather, such aspects appear to be fundamental to the safe classroom. However, students describe that, in clear rules and expectations about behaviour, they feel a genuinely grounded love for and concern about them. (p. 42).

Teachers who are predictable and confident and who show good leadership skills are teachers whom students trust and can turn to for support. On the other hand, a teacher with poor leadership skills who seems insecure will instead have difficulties in building relationships with students.

Interpersonal professions, such as teaching, demand knowledge about how to handle conflicts and problematic situations. When problems arise, the teacher plays an important role in teaching the students how to solve the situation in a constructive way. In doing so, the teacher presents the tools needed to be able to solve conflicts constructively in the future. Solving conflicts constructively will strengthen respect and relationships not only among the students but also between the students and the

teacher. At the same time, the teacher is adding to the relational bank account.

For reflection:

- What kind of relationships between teachers and students are the best, and how does the teacher ensure developing these relationships?-
- What factors affect the trust in a teacher based on his or her appearance (clothes, hairstyle, hygiene, etc.)?
- In which classroom situations is “withitness” extra difficult?

Nonverbal Communication

An experienced teacher can meet a new group of students and get everyone’s attention without, seemingly, doing anything. How can a new teacher—or a student teacher—adopt this nonverbal communication? Our experience of working with student teachers indicates that focusing on some aspects of nonverbal communication is especially rewarding: body posture, movements in the classroom, eye contact, breathing, vocal variation, elimination of unconscious nonverbal communication, and avoidance of discrepancy between different parts of the communication. Getting access to and using these tools is essential to becoming a successful teacher and leader.

Nonverbal communication can be learned from a theoretical perspective through studying the literature, from a student’s perspective by studying a teacher in action, and from a teacher’s perspective when practicing teaching. A combination of all three perspectives gives a profound understanding of the effects of nonverbal communication. In a training context, one should be given the opportunity to do the same part of a lesson several times but with different nonverbal approaches and receive feedback on the consequences of choosing different types of nonverbal communication. Filming oneself while teaching and analyzing one’s performance together with a colleague or a supervisor is a tool that is especially useful.

Using professional and authentic nonverbal communication is crucial. Neither acting nor using one’s private self is applicable for a successful teacher. One acts and moves differently at home than he or she does at work, and one needs to adjust the private self to the professional role as teacher. For example, yawning and stretching are natural things one does, but being a professional teacher also means holding back that yawn and stretch. In general, individuals are less distinct in their movements privately than one ought to be in their profession. Teachers need to analyze and reflect continuously upon their interaction via nonverbal communication throughout their professional career to maintain a productive learning environment.

For reflection:

- Why is it that an experienced teacher can meet a new group of students and get everyone’s attention without, seemingly, doing anything?
- In which situations can it be extra challenging for a teacher to separate the private self from the professional self?

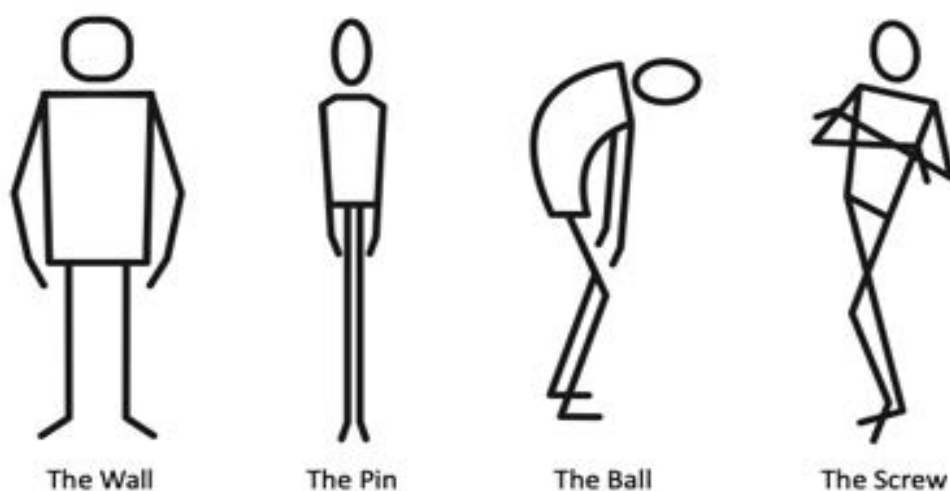
Body Posture

A teacher with an expansive and open body posture is likely to be recognized as secure, confident, and trustworthy, while a teacher who tries to hide behind a desk or behind his or her own arms or who touches the face or neck frequently appears insecure. According to Laban (1960), whose framework is taught at National Sports

Universities in Sweden (Engdahl et al., 2022), there are four basic body postures: wall-like, pin-like, ball-like, and screw-like (named *The Wall*, *The Pin*, *The Ball*, and *The Screw*; see Figure). Everyone uses all four basic body postures daily. *The Wall*, which is straight and broad and the most expansive body posture among the four, signals strength and leadership and is a good choice for a teacher. However, one risks being perceived as authoritarian and dominant when solely using grandiose space-taking, as studies by Witkower et al. (2020) have indicated. On the other hand, when adding an openness to *The Wall* through a slight expansion of the chest, one signals knowledge and expertise. This subtle chest expansion can be achieved through what in Swedish is called *Glada Punkten* (“The Happy Spot”), a concept coined by speech therapist Kerstin Forsmark (1977). By slightly lifting the chest upwards and forward or by consciously expanding the chest while inhaling, the speaker can find The Happy Spot. Another exercise one can do to find this spot is imagining showing off a gold medal hanging on one’s chest.

Figure

Illustrations of Four Key Body Postures



Note. Authors’ illustrations.

Moving Around in the Classroom

A teacher must be aware of where to position oneself in the classroom as well as how to move and at what pace, because these movements will influence how the teacher is viewed as a leader. At the beginning of a lesson, it is important to make an active decision about where to stand to be heard and seen the best and to take a look at the classroom to get acquainted with the physical space. When helping students, a teacher needs to reflect upon how to approach them. One can, for example, lower the body and turn the torso in the same direction as the student, avoiding leaning over the desk or approaching the student from above. By doing so, the teacher helps the student to focus on the task, signaling that the work is in focus, not the student as a person (Steinberg, 2019). In this position, one needs to keep the openness, The Happy Spot, and not reduce the expansion of the chest.

Furthermore, when moving around in the classroom, it is important to do so without stress if one is to support a good learning environment. Staying a few extra

seconds before moving to the next student will make the students feel that the teacher is still available for help and will also create calmness and a good classroom climate.

For reflection:

- How can applying *The Wall* and *The Happy Spot* change the attention given during the beginning of a lesson?
- To develop the teaching in a school, teachers can visit each other's classrooms and pay attention to how the colleague moves in the classroom. How does the classroom climate change when the teacher who is being watched consciously changes the pace?

Eye Contact

According to the research fields related to “teacher immediacy” and “teacher enthusiasm” (Babad, 2008), a successful teacher is someone who uses good eye contact. Teachers who seldom meet the eyes of students are perceived as being insecure. A guideline is to make sure one has eye contact with all students at some time during a lesson—and preferably the same amount of eye contact with each student.

“
...Eye contact is an effective tool for creating opportunities for good learning outcomes.
”

With the eyes, one can communicate curiosity, kindness, and empathy, but the eyes can also indicate the direction in which the teacher wants the students to focus (Steinberg, 2020). Eye contact is a powerful tool; therefore, one must be cautious with how to use it. Frowning and staring at students will diminish the students' trust, and it can be embarrassing for a student to have eye

contact when dealing with certain topics in school. A shy student may have a hard time with eye contact, and it may be counterproductive for some students with neuropsychiatric diagnoses. It is also important to be aware of cultural differences concerning eye contact. In some cultures, a student giving eye contact to a teacher can be considered rude. Still, eye contact is an effective tool for creating opportunities for good learning outcomes.

With good eye contact, one manifests a commitment to teaching students and one will be perceived as friendly, confident, and open to communication. One who avoids eye contact, on the other hand, may risk being perceived as insecure, indifferent, disinterested, and even cold (Backlund, 2006). It is also important that the teacher's eye contact and facial expression reflect what is being said in order to avoid sending mixed messages.

Breathing

An essential and often forgotten aspect of leadership in the classroom is the teacher's breathing. Deep, slow, and even breathing signals confidence; shallow and fast breathing patterns signal insecurity and nervousness. In front of a restless class, a skilled teacher will intuitively slow down the breathing and the speed of speaking to calm down the class. This is an example of how a skilled teacher creates a calm learning environment without, seemingly, doing anything. Fast and shallow breathing will, on the other hand, risk increasing the restlessness of the class. Being aware of one's breathing and having a good breathing technique are therefore good leadership tools.

For reflection:

- In which situations can eye contact be difficult for a teacher?
- To develop instructional quality in a school, teachers can visit each other's classrooms and reflect upon the teacher's breathing—for example, when the teacher needs to act upon problems during the lesson. How does the breathing pattern influence the outcome of the classroom climate?
- If the classroom is noisy and the teacher slows down the breathing before acting, how does that influence the outcome?

Voice

The voice is a major part of our communication. Messages are revealed not only through words but also through the quality of the voice. Hence, the voice has both a verbal and a nonverbal aspect. Research on communication for teachers highlights the significance of the nonverbal aspect of the voice, such as vocal variety (Babad, 2008). When mastering the voice, the teacher has a tool to awaken curiosity and excitement, to make the students calm down, and to help them focus on the given task.

A person's voice is closely related to one's identity and therefore can be demanding to modify. Hence, it is less challenging and therefore beneficial to begin by practicing the more technical aspects of the voice, such as speed, volume, pitch, melody, accents, pauses, and articulation. It is a good exercise for a teacher, while speaking or reading, to explore consciously how far one can exaggerate each aspect. The more a teacher consciously experiments with the voice, the more vocal variety the teacher will have at his or her disposal. In one class, the best vocal tool might be to lower the volume of the voice to make the students become curious, quiet, and focused, while in another class other vocal tools will be needed for the same result. Raising the voice with annoyance or frustration will undermine the leadership and risk creating a learning environment in which students do not dare to ask or answer questions in fear of being "told off."

Leakage

Unconscious nonverbal communication, often referred to as "leakage" (Babad, 2008), includes small nervous moves—for example, fiddling with a pen—or repeatedly using fillers such as "er," "ah," "hm," or other insignificant words or sounds. Leakage generates contradictory signals and is a distraction for students. When a teacher is standing in front of a class, students will often interpret leakage as the teacher being insecure or nervous. It is important for teachers to be made aware of their leakage and what it is signaling, as well as to be given opportunities to practice changing it. Eliminating those small insignificant movements and sounds is challenging, but with practice and patience, the leakage will disappear. Filming oneself is an effective method to observe and reduce leakage. Showing a negative affect, such as by sighing and frowning, are other forms of leakage that can appear when, for instance, a teacher is provoked by students. Allowing such leakage will have a negative impact on the students' learning and will also harm the relationship between the teacher and the students (Babad et al., 1989).

Messages are revealed not only through words but also through the quality of the voice.

For reflection:

- Teachers can record 10 minutes of their teaching and, together with a colleague, identify the technical aspects of the voice mentioned above (speed, volume, pitch, melody, accents, pauses, and articulation). What adjustments would benefit the learning situation?
- Teachers can also film themselves during a lesson and together reflect upon what leakage was detected in the films.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted some successful strategies with an emphasis on classroom management and nonverbal communication. Applying these strategies will strengthen the teacher's leadership and result in high-quality teaching and good educational outcomes.

In the social context of a classroom, withitness is a significant tool of a successful teacher and, together with rules and routines, makes up the central part of good classroom management. Teaching is an interpersonal profession, and therefore it is important for a teacher to build authentic, trustworthy relationships through genuine communication, verbal as well as nonverbal. It is necessary that there be a congruence between verbal and nonverbal communication and crucial that the communication be professional. The teacher's nonverbal communication needs to be in line with the teacher's personal style to be authentic. A student teacher can study theories, acquire practical experience, and receive guidance to learn and develop good leadership skills. For experienced teachers, it is essential—together with colleagues—to analyze, discuss, and improve these skills continuously to develop teaching and maintain good leadership.

A good teacher is a professional and confident leader who creates an effective learning environment where students can reach their highest potential. Therefore, acquiring and advancing one's leadership is as important for student teachers as it is for experienced teachers.

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