

# Moral leadership

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The purpose of this paper is to explore our understanding of the issues surrounding the concept of moral leadership. Moral leadership is a powerful and compelling notion and the phrase has gained significant currency and approval. This paper seeks to move from exhortation to analysis to try to enhance our awareness of what moral leadership actually involves and how it might be better understood. Moral leadership is increasingly seen as being an important component of any model of leadership for a number of reasons:

- The disproportionate influence that leaders have in creating organisational culture  
  
The view that education is primarily a moral process and should therefore be led by those who are ethically literate
- The belief that 'form should follow function', schools should be overtly moral communities
- The need for leaders to have 'moral confidence' to inform their decision making ( every decision in schools has a moral dimension)

The paper starts by exploring the relationship between the concepts of ethics, values and morals. There is then a

discussion of the nature of education as a process. This is followed by a review of the ethics

of education and then what might be the ethical foundations of educational leadership. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the issues surrounding the development of moral leadership.

For the purposes of this discussion, it may be helpful to draw distinctions between ethics, values and morals. Ethics will be used as an all-embracing term to cover the various alternative 'grand theories' of human behaviour. This is the abstract or philosophical level of debate in which principles are established and validated, all of the world's great faiths offer an ethical system as do the great philosophical models such as humanism or liberalism. Values are the expression of ethical system for a particular time and place; for a community or individual. Thus a person might subscribe to the Christian ethical principles but will interpret these according to a range of cultural and personal imperatives. So for some Christians, the somewhat contradictory teachings of the Bible about violence might be interpreted as absolute pacifism, the notion of the just-war or the legitimization of revenge. All are justifiable

within the broad ethical system – it is the creation of the personal construct that makes them values. Morals refer to the analysis of meta-systems and personal values in action. Thus even if the concept of the just-war is accepted, there still has to be a judgement as to whether a particular conflict meets the criteria for vindication as a just-war. At all stages of the process – from ethical system to personal values to moral debate and actual decision making - there will be debate, interpretation and the formulation of rules, precepts and codes.

This is an immensely complex process and one that is central to the most elementary definitions of what it means to be human; indeed, it could be argued that we create, find or lose our essential humanity by the extent to which we can participate in this process. It is possible to reduce this complex process to three deceptively simple questions:

- What are the principles by which we should live?
- How do those principles become personally valid and meaningful?
- How should we act?

These questions reveal one of the most significant issues in any debate about human behaviour – the difference between normative (or

prescriptive) statements and analytical statements. Normative statements are definitive, self-validating and are corroborated by reference to a higher authority. Analytical statements are derived from a process of critical elucidation and are often empirical in nature i.e. derived from observation and experience. Normative approaches to ethics tend to produce 'grand theories', analytical approaches focus on understanding behaviour and clarifying language and implicit assumptions.

It is much easier to adopt a normative stance – the ethical framework, personal values and moral behaviour tend to be defined in an authoritative way and there is only limited discretion or ambiguity available. For many this is comforting and reassuring and a reflection of a natural order. For others, such an approach is an abdication of personal responsibility and a denial of the integrity of the individual. It may well also be a repudiation of the world in which we live. The world is increasingly in the 'grey zone'.

We understand better that in conditions of extremity, there are rarely to be found comfortingly simple categories of good and evil, guilty and innocent. We know more about the choices and compromises faced by men and women in

hard times, and we are no longer quick to judge those who accommodate themselves to impossible situations..... (Judt, (2001) p. xiv)

It is this move from ethical absolutism to relativism – from acceptance and application to questioning and application that raises fundamental questions for educational leadership.

### The Nature of Education

If educational leadership is about more than managing successful schools then a number of profound issues are raised. The most fundamental questions centre on the nature of the educational process – 'What does it mean to educate someone?' and 'How do we recognise an educated person'? These are profound questions that will shape our understanding of schools, the curriculum, the roles of teachers and students and the nature of educational leadership. The issue is one of process and outcomes – How do we design an educational system that is ethical both in the way it works as well as in what it produces?

For example, most schools operate Rules, Codes of

Conduct etc which represent a moral hegemony and as such are unexceptional. Such rules and codes are usually normative rather than analytical and are implemented through hierarchical authority and sanctions. Compliance is rewarded and where interpretation is necessary, it is usually done by those in authority. Moral behaviour is thus defined and prescribed, there are sanctions and rewards and there is the assumption that the prevailing orthodoxy is right for all. This is clearly normative and prescriptive and models an ethical system which does not recognise the issues raised by Judt. Thus a first major issue for educational leaders is not just what ethical principles should inform behaviour but how and why such principles should be formulated and then how moral norms should be agreed. It is much easier to formulate ethical principles than it is to create a process which creates those principles by modelling them in action. This is reflected in the difference between **a priori** and **a posteriori** statements i.e. statements which are self-justifying or justifiable only on the basis of experience respectively. This is at the heart of what it means to be educated – the acceptance of information or the creation of personal knowledge.

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The difference is that between teaching someone to behave in a moral way and helping them to develop ethical understanding that is translated into a personal value system and so informs, and constructs, moral behaviour. For an educational leader, there are many themes or issues that require this sort of processing:

- the nature of childhood
- the concept of social justice
- the related notions of equity and entitlement
- the potential tension between individual rights and public responsibilities
- the significance attached to personal autonomy
- the source of teachers' authority
- the nature of the learning process
- the purposes of education
- the place of leadership in education

For each of these themes, there are ethical perspectives which have to be clarified, codified into a personal value system and then applied in the day-to-day life of a school. Schools are moral communities, there is no

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aspect of school life that does not have an ethical antecedent, all decisions are based on personal value systems and the morality of the school is expressed through the daily concrete experiences of all its members. It is impossible to separate the educational process from ethical considerations as the decision to educate is, of itself, an ethical decision.

## The Ethics of Education

It is beyond the remit of this discussion to attempt to prescribe what **should** be the ethical foundations of education or even to describe what **could** be the basis for such a judgement. Rather it is important to analyse the basis on which the alternatives are identified and the means by which an ethical theory is chosen and developed into personal values.

The range of options of ethical systems is essentially the history of humanity. Individual choice will be largely determined by a range of cultural imperatives – of which education is probably the most powerful after the family and community. Ethical principals evolve and change in response to a wide range of complex variables and, in a form of natural selection, develop into distinct species which thrive in specific environments. There is

therefore a choice which is reflected in the notion of a pluralist society in which diversity of opinion is not only recognised but actually celebrated in those societies which allow such diversity.

For educational leaders in Anglophone and European countries, the choices are circumscribed by the overarching Judeo-Christian tradition and by the fact that they work in democracies in which most significant decisions about education are taken by governments and there is therefore a perceived public duty to implement such policy. However a cultural tradition, however persuasive, and a government policy, however large the majority, do not grant automatic ethical veracity. A number of tests are necessary and these might include the following:

1. To what extent does this ethical proposition meet the tests of logic and reason?
2. How far is a proposition consistent with our scientific knowledge?
3. What would happen if this proposition became a universal law?
4. What would be the impact of this proposition on existing cultural norms and patterns of behaviour?

5. If I were to adopt this proposition, what changes would occur in my life and would they be acceptable to my family and friends, those whom I work with and to me?
6. To what extent is this proposition consistent with higher order ethical principles?

A range of educational issues can be subjected to these tests and produce some interesting responses. Selection and streaming, for example, might be justified on short-term, expedient grounds but have significant ethical implications in the broader scheme of things. Opposition to inclusion begs many significant ethical questions. Inevitably, in a complex society, responses will be couched with caveats and a hierarchy of significance and may well lead to the adoption of the "greatest happiness" argument. The danger is one of ethical pragmatism, adopting a stance because it is the least objectionable or because it comes closest to achieving consensus.

One of the reasons why we still debate the nature and purposes of education (and why we still need leadership in education) is that the simplistic quantitative or authoritative responses are not blindly accepted. If the 'right answer' exists and had been found,

then education would be a non-contentious human activity. But it remains a key debate in every society – even totalitarian democracies. How then is the educational leader to choose? By what criteria are policies to be accepted, rejected or undermined? On what basis are decisions to be taken when there is a genuine choice (and there still are many real choices to be made)?

The answer lies perhaps in the concept of ethical authenticity. Taylor (1991) captures this concept most powerfully:

There is a certain way of being that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for me. Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. (p29)

The problems of the ethics of education are best resolved by authentic educationalists. The personal authenticity of those who lead the debate is the best guarantee that education will allow the development of the authenticity of all:

What our situation seems to call for is a complex, multi-levelled struggle, intellectual, spiritual and political, in which the debates in the public arena interlink with those in a host of institutional settings, like hospitals and schools..... (Ibid p120)

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It follows from what has been written above that any discussion about the nature of schools is essentially a discussion about ethics. Given the significance that is attached to the role of leadership in schools, it follows that a significant component of the debate about leadership has to centre on its ethical components. However this somewhat blunt assertion needs to be developed to clarify exactly why moral leadership is significant. In this context, moral leadership is defined as:

*Leadership behaviour which is consistent with personal and organisational values which are in turn derived from a coherent ethical system.*

Moral leadership is important for a complex range of interacting factors. Firstly, as mentioned above, education is, of itself, an ethically based process. Decisions as to the nature of the educational process are ethical decisions

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and, given the incredibly complex range of options and variables available, it would seem appropriate to argue that educational leaders should be ethically literate i.e. they should be able to lead and participate in debates about fundamental educational issues. For example, the debate about whether the core purpose of education should be liberal and humanistic or instrumental and reductionist is live and real in most western educational systems. Two real issues emerge for our understanding of leadership; firstly that leaders should understand the issues in the debate and secondly they should feel confident in participating in the debate.

The second issue is that teaching is, or aspires to be, a profession. There are multiple definitions of profession, professional and professionalism but one key characteristic is that professionals' work is characterised by its ethical purpose. Thus, at least in principle, doctors and nurses are concerned with relieving suffering; judges and lawyers with the search for justice. If teaching is concerned with the education of society then it surely follows that the leadership of teachers should be characterised as leadership of professionals and should therefore have an ethical dimension.

Schools are social communities and this gives rise to the third proposition about educational leadership. One of the defining characteristics of a healthy community is that there is a consensus about the values by which it should live and that one of the functions of leadership in a community is the articulation of, and sustained engagement with, the values that facilitate social cohesion. Leadership of a community involves securing agreement as to what constitutes the moral consensus, interpreting that consensus to respond to new situations and ensuring that the prevailing hegemony works for all members of the community.

The fourth aspect of moral leadership relates to the culture of a school. Culture is simplest and best defined as 'the way we do things round here'. In essence, culture refers to the language, symbolism and behaviour of an organisation. It is thus a powerful expression of, and reinforcing agent for, the moral purpose of the organisation. It is in the symbolic role of leadership that there are the greatest opportunities to reinforce, extend and apply community values and this is powerfully reflected in the language and rituals of many schools.

The final element to be considered in this section is the notion of the leader as a model. In many societies, one of the defining characteristics of leadership is that it is the exemplification of what that society most values. This imposes an incredible burden on the individual and it may not be sustainable but in essence one of the justifications for having leaders is that they help us see how we should be. However, given the status and authority accorded to leaders, not least in schools, there does seem to be a justification for the expectation that the behaviour of leaders will model and exemplify the expectations of the community in the professional context if no other. This is not to argue that every leader should be a paragon but rather that their actions should be seen to be ethically based, value driven and morally consistent.

This clearly calls for a model of leadership which is of a different order of significance to the notions of effective management and successful headship or the limited definitions of leadership which only focus on improvement or instruction. We expect our doctors to understand the ethics underpinning their medical decisions; we expect our judges' decisions to be rooted in jurisprudence, not just the application of statute; so we

should expect educational leaders to be firmly rooted in the ethics of education. However, this raises the complex and challenging question of which ethical framework.

### **The Development of Moral Leadership**

Moral leadership cannot be taught; it is part of a process of personal development – an ‘intellectual and spiritual’ struggle that moves towards personal authenticity, intuitive understanding and so action based on a sophisticated model of personal meaning. What is both encouraging and exciting and yet worrying and frightening is that this is the process of becoming totally human; there is no difference between moral leadership in education and being a moral person – a course in ethics does not make people ethical. However there are a number of strategies which can help to enhance what might be termed moral confidence – the ability to respond to complex situations in an ethically consistent way. None of these strategies are unique to the development of moral leadership – it is the focus they are given that makes them relevant.

1. Engagement with the meta-narratives; i.e. reading the ethical classics which will include the texts of the great

religions, many works of literature as well as technical works on ethics, education and leadership. The purpose of such reading is to deepen awareness and understanding, to extend ones personal vocabulary and mental models and to stimulate reflection.

2. Reflection-in-action is a crucial learning process in which an individual’s conceptual map is used to analyse actual practice so that both map and the practice are interrogated and revised so as to inform future actions.
3. Coaching can be powerful facilitating and mediating process to support the first two strategies. Coaching might be provided by a more experienced leader, a person who is a skilled facilitator or by a peer who is experiencing the same situation.
4. Networking, formal or informal, is a further powerful strategy that facilitates exemplification, clarification, problem analysis, solution generation, advice and reassurance.

### **References and Further Reading**

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