Authoritative Classroom Management: How Control and Nurturance Work Together

Despite broad recognition that teaching excellence requires meeting students’ intellectual and social needs, teachers struggle to manage—and learning theory struggles to explain—the interplay between the academic and social dimensions of classroom life. Drawing from research on parenting and child development, the author offers parenting style theory as an explanatory framework. The author begins by describing the two primary dimensions of parenting style (control and nurturance) and the influence of various styles on children’s learning and development. The author then discusses the two primary channels whereby style functions, using case studies of three classrooms to illustrate how control and nurturance interact to influence student engagement and learning. Finally, the author argues that because this theory is intuitive, robust, and comprehensive, it is an important vehicle for advancing understanding of teacher influence on student outcomes and school improvement efforts.

The best teachers don’t simply teach content, they teach people. Decades of evidence demonstrate that the added value of attending a given classroom stems from both the quality of teachers’ instructional practices and their relationships with students (Emmer, Evertson, & Anderson, 1980; Pianta, Belsky, Houts, Morrison, & The National Institute, 2007; Rivers & Sanders, 1996). The academic correlates of person–centered instruction are substantive and include better student participation, critical thinking, satisfaction, achievement, motivation, social connection, dropout prevention, and reduced disruptive behavior (see Cornelius-White, 2007, for
Early positive teacher–student relationships appear to be particularly essential to the development of students who enter school with low academic and social skills (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Despite broad recognition that teaching excellence requires meeting students’ intellectual and social needs, teachers struggle to manage—and learning theory struggles to explain—the interplay between the academic and social dimensions of classroom life. A recent and rare longitudinal study of elementary education in the United States offers a glimpse into how teachers currently manage these dimensions. Following 2,500 first, third, and fifth grade students for three years, Pianta and his colleagues (2007) found that, although classroom teachers made good use of instructional time, they paid limited attention to conceptual understanding and offered feedback focused largely on accuracy of outcomes, rather than the process of solving problems. Even when classroom interactions were more intellectually stimulating, there was little guarantee that students’ (and teachers’) social and emotional needs would be met. In fact, the number of students who consistently experienced a classroom with high-quality instruction and a healthy emotional climate was astonishingly low: 7%.

This is a dreary portrait with significant consequences. Specifically, I believe that knowing more about how to achieve teaching excellence along both academic and social dimensions may be the antidote to two pressing educational problems. First, it may reduce our nation’s depressing student dropout rates. Although estimates vary, it is clear that by the time they reach adolescence, a significant portion of students do not wish to be in school (Sables & Gaviola, 2007). Academics are not the only reason students drop out. Feelings of isolation and frustration also contribute to disengagement (Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). Second, it may stem the alarming rates of teacher attrition and burnout; as many as 50% of new teachers leave the field within five years, and 20% of those who stay say they would choose another profession if they could (NEA, 2003). Two of the most frequently cited and highest ranked reasons for teacher burnout are classroom management and discipline (Haberman, 2004). Like their students, teachers have difficulty forging connections within school walls.

Links between teacher–student relationships and academic learning have become the focus of increasing study, yet much of the work to date lacks a strong theoretical basis (Wentzel, 2002). What education seems to need is a framework for talking about how and why both academic and social dimensions are necessary to the enterprise of school and to helping people flourish in individual classroom settings. Moreover, if it is to be readily and widely adopted as a vehicle for improvement, the framework we use to create this dialogue must be intuitive, as well as scientifically robust.

In this article I argue that such a framework exists. Drawing from research on parenting and child development, I offer parenting style theory as a means for explaining observed links among teachers’ instructional practices, classroom social dynamics, and student outcomes. As I have argued elsewhere (Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2006), applying this theoretical frame to classrooms is important because we know surprisingly little about the specific ways in which parents and teachers influence student engagement and learning. This article describes parenting style, its influence on children’s learning and development, and the two primary channels whereby style functions.

What Is Parenting Style and How Does It Influence Children?

In the late 1960s, Baumrind (1967) began to develop a relatively simple model of parenting. For Baumrind, good parenting involved balancing two dimensions: control, or enforcing demands for appropriate behavior, and nurturance, or supporting children’s individuality and agency. On the control dimension, Baumrind identified two essential processes: establishment of consistent demands, and scaling up those demands according to children’s developmental capacities for autonomy (known as maturity de-
mands). She identified the nurturance dimension as the process of being responsive and sensitive to the child’s needs. Especially important to this dimension was the provision of resources needed to meet established demands.

Using these dimensions and processes, Baumrind (1978) identified four major parenting styles. One style was high in both control and nurturance. These authoritative parents expected mature behavior, used reason to gain compliance, and were warm and supportive. Other parents, labeled authoritarian, were also highly controlling and valued strict obedience but relied on coercion and were less nurturing. A third parenting configuration, permissive, involved few limits or demands, and moderate nurturing or even lack of involvement. Finally, there were neglectful parents, who offered low levels of both control and nurturance.

How did children fare in each of these contexts? Not surprisingly, when Baumrind (1991) followed children from these four different contexts across adolescence, children who consistently experienced authoritative parenting had the most positive social and academic outcomes. Children reared in these nurturing but firmly controlled homes exhibited high self-control, and were achievement oriented, friendly with peers, and cooperative with adults. Less positive social and academic outcomes were found for children reared in authoritarian homes. For boys, high levels of aggression often emerged, whereas girls often displayed little independence. Children reared in permissive homes often exhibited low self-control and low self-reliance and often experienced frustrated social relationships and academic outcomes. The most negative outcomes were associated with neglectful parenting and included low self-esteem and high levels of aggression and impulsive behavior.

Baumrind’s conception of parenting style advanced understanding of parental influence on child development because it considered parenting practice within a larger interpersonal context. That is, it acknowledged that the influence of any one aspect of parenting (e.g., the use of a specific disciplinary technique) was dependent on the larger configuration of all aspects. No practice operated in isolation.

Since Baumrind’s seminal work, decades of researchers have used parenting style theory to effectively predict adolescent academic and social outcomes (Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Glasgow, Dornbusch, Troyer, Steinberg, & Ritter, 1997; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991). Across this literature, authoritative parenting has consistently emerged as an optimal model with some variation along cultural lines (Chao, 1994; Steinberg et al., 1991).

**How Does Parenting Style Work?**

Baumrind’s concept of parenting style is compelling. But how does parenting style work? Darling and Steinberg (1993) offered two explanations, both of which hinge on distinguishing between parenting style and parenting practice. This distinction follows Baumrind’s idea that parenting practices are situated; they function within a larger interpersonal context.

First, style can have a direct influence on parenting practice: the effectiveness of a single practice, such as a discipline technique, depends on the configuration of the control dimension. This dimension involves two processes: firm control and maturity demands. For example, both authoritative and authoritarian parents might use a curfew to exert control over a child and consistently deliver sanctions when the curfew is broken (i.e., use firm control). In an authoritarian home, however, the curfew would be administered according to the parent’s needs and values (i.e., limit maturity demands). By contrast, an authoritative parent would adjust the curfew according to the child’s advancing capacity to assume personal responsibility (i.e., make appropriate maturity demands). Lack of fit between child ability and parenting practice in the authoritarian home may frustrate the child’s ability to attain self-control. This is an example of how variations in the control dimension of style can make the same practice better.
In sociocultural terms (Vygotsky, 1978), an authoritative context directly enhances the effectiveness of practice, because this style offers children a better scaffold. Authoritative parents seem to know when to get out of the child’s way. For example, examining the relation between style and practice, Pratt, Green, MacVicar, and Bountrogianni (1992) found that during a tutoring session most parents instructed their children to use similar problem-solving procedures; however, some children performed better than others on posttest measures. Children’s performance was related to the larger quality of the parent’s teaching style. The best teachers were parents who provided increased support in response to failure and did not interfere with the child’s autonomy after success. These good teachers had also been rated as authoritative during a separate observation and interview.

Style can also work through a second indirect path that depends on children’s receptivity to parental influence. For example, continuing the example of a curfew, the child of an authoritative parent might tend to internalize the rule because the parent adequately explains its purpose. Because the child of an authoritarian parent is simply coerced to follow it, that child may end up resisting the rule. In an academic example, if a parent values the goal of high achievement and wants his or her child to also value this goal, an authoritative context is more likely to foster internalization of the achievement goal, because it offers high expectations and strong nurturance. Style makes children more or less open to adult influence. This path is supported by evidence that children’s assessments of parenting characteristics tend to predict their own academic competence better than parents’ ratings (Walker, Green, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2006) and that adolescents’ perceptions of acceptance and involvement are particularly important predictors of academic outcomes (Glasgow et al., 1997).

So, if one thinks about style as an ambient radio signal that is transmitted from parent to child, then authoritative parenting style is more effective because it functions well in two ways: first, it has higher fidelity (i.e., it’s a better signal) and second, it has listeners who want to tune in.

Translating Parenting Style Theory Into Classroom Settings

Baumrind’s work advanced understanding of parenting by addressing a dichotomy in early theories of parenting that emphasized either control (Watson, 1928) or nurturance (Rogers, 1960). Similarly, the concept of teaching style can advance current understanding of teacher influence on student learning and development by reconciling the dichotomy between schools’ highly controlling zero tolerance policies and other more humanistic approaches to teaching and learning.

A style perspective reconciles this dichotomy by acknowledging the essential contributions of both control and nurturance. Both are essential aspects of a larger whole. Moreover, style helps us to see that the quality of the whole influences the effects of the specific: levels of control and nurturance influence the effects of individual teaching practices on student learning and engagement. The influence of any one aspect of teaching is dependent on the larger configuration of all aspects. In practical terms, the style perspective addresses a common teacher complaint, “I do that, too, but it doesn’t work for me.”

What could we learn if we looked systematically at teachers’ use of specific practices in relation to variations in teaching style? This is the question I posed in a natural experiment designed to offer proof of concept for the teaching style perspective (for details, see Walker, 2008). Using multiple methods, I identified three fifth grade math teachers who were similar in their instructional practices but who represented three different teaching styles: authoritative (high control, high nurturance); authoritarian (high control, low nurturance); and permissive (low control, moderate nurturance). All were female with similar years of experience and taught in the same school with classroom doors mere yards apart. I interviewed the teachers and spent time in their classrooms from the first day of school until the end of the first semester, capturing their discourse during whole class instruction. I also asked their students to complete surveys at multiple time
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points. Surveys asked students about their ability beliefs, academic engagement, and their teacher’s practices and teaching style. Student learning was evaluated by comparing achievement scores from the prior and current academic year.

At the beginning of the year, students were more similar than different on several dimensions. First, their math achievement scores for the prior year revealed a similar range of ability levels within each classroom. Second, students were similar in their self-reported engagement: most appeared optimistic about the school year ahead and confident in their ability to meet the challenges presented in middle school math. Students also perceived important similarities among their teachers. All three teachers were perceived as highly focused on the process of learning and less focused on production of correct responses. Analyses of teacher discourse corroborated student perceptions: The majority of teacher talk in each classroom focused on supporting student learning.

Despite these significant similarities, students began to manifest patterns of engagement and learning depending upon their classroom membership. Consistent with research on parenting style, the best student outcomes were associated with an authoritative teaching style. Students in this classroom were confident, engaged, and made significant year-end achievement gains. These results likely stemmed from the authoritative teacher’s use of positive instructional practices within a highly controlling and nurturing context. This teacher made consistent demands for compliance and frequent demands for self-management (e.g., “Okay, pair up. One of you is going to be the problem-solver and the other one is going to be the problem checker. If you are the checker you need to explain how to get the right answer.”). She also made twice as many nurturing statements as her teacher peers.

Students in non-authoritative settings had less optimal outcomes. In the authoritarian classroom, students fared well academically; however, they used avoidant, ego-protecting learning strategies. These results may stem from this teacher’s use of positive instructional practices within a highly controlling but non-nurturing context. Although she consistently demanded compliance, she rarely demanded student self-management. Moreover, she made actively non-nurturing statements (e.g., “That’s irrelevant”; “I’ll zap you.”). Students in the permissive classroom were as engaged as their authoritative peers but made much smaller achievement gains. These results likely stem from this teacher’s use of positive instructional practices within a moderately nurturing and inconsistently controlled context (e.g., “Since the students who forgot their math books have gone to get them from their locker, the girls can go the bathroom and the boys can get a snack.”).

Recalling the radio signal metaphor, which of these teachers was emitting a signal with the highest fidelity? Which signal was being tuned in (and tuned out) by students?

- The authoritative teacher emitted a quality signal and students tuned in.
- The authoritarian teacher emitted a quality signal but students weren’t always tuned in.
- The permissive teacher’s students were tuning in but received a low quality signal.

What Now?

In this article, I have described parenting style theory. Like others (Wentzel, 2002), I believe that this theoretical framework has the potential to explain and predict the interplay among teacher practice, teacher–student relationships, and student engagement and learning. Because this theory is intuitive, robust, and comprehensive, using it as an empirical playbook can advance understanding of teacher influence on student outcomes and improve schools. From a multidisciplinary standpoint, applying parenting style theory to the study of teacher effectiveness is important because it allows us to evaluate the role of similar mechanisms across the ecological niches of home and school. Moreover, a cross-disciplinary approach has the potential to paint a more holistic portrait of adult-child interactions as developmental contexts.
One central idea to emerge from comparison of these literatures is the concept of style as a signal system or “mechanism of information flow” (Doyle, this issue). In classroom terms, Doyle defined this as “the situational instructions [emphasis added] for behavior within a lesson.” Knowing more about style and its consequences is consistent with his idea that thinking of classrooms in terms of signal systems offers a “more robust foundation for helping teachers, especially novice teachers, anticipate the classroom consequences of different approaches to instruction.”

In sum, looking at classrooms through the lens of parenting style and thinking about style as a signal system can advance the field of classroom management research in three ways:

1. Style reconciles the dimensions of control and nurturance. In this model both dimensions are necessary, but neither single dimension is sufficient to create an optimal learning environment.

2. Style takes a configurational stance, which assumes that the influence of a specific teacher practice on student learning and engagement is best understood when it is evaluated within a larger interpersonal context (defined as the balance of teacher control and nurturance). This approach is essential to validating the efficacy of person-centered instruction because it does not simply view nurturance as a nice add-on, but rather as a requisite hallmark of effective teaching.

3. Style offers specific testable hypotheses. It suggests that configurations of teacher practice, teacher style, and student outcomes are best understood as occurring in direct and indirect paths. These hypotheses pose interesting questions: How and when does style function as a moderator? How and when does nurturance function as a mediator?

Even young students know that teacher–student relationships influence their learning and by adolescence, students can explain how relationships with teachers influence their academic work (see Davis, 2003, for a review). For example, adolescents who viewed their teachers as mean or distant described their academic work as coercive and irrelevant, whereas students who had positive relationships with teachers viewed their tasks as fun and meaningful. Students’ descriptions of the links between their engagement and learning and teacher–student relationships resonate with what I have observed in authoritarian and authoritative classrooms. Students’ remarkable sensitivity to the relational quality of classrooms is also consistent with the idea that the effectiveness of a specific teaching practice can be mediated by students’ receptivity to adult influence. Style can lead students to tune in and tune out.

Teachers, too, believe that relationships play an important role in learning; however, we know little about this empirically. Through interviews, Davis and Ashley (2003) identified three teacher beliefs about the role of positive teacher–student relationships. First, teachers believed that positive relationships allowed them to push students to do more challenging work (which resonates with style’s direct influence on practice). Second, they believed that positive relationships promote learning and motivation because they create a psychologically safe context in which students can open up (which resonates with style’s indirect influence on practice). Third, they reported that positive relationships with students enhanced their own creativity, persistence, and motivation. Evidence that teachers also are transformed by positive relationships with students has implications for my claim that knowing more about how to achieve teaching excellence in both intellectual and social terms can redress teacher attrition and burnout.

Helping teachers think critically about the structures and processes embedded in classrooms seems like an important step in empowering teachers to leverage, rather than passively accept, classroom features. The concept of teaching style is useful to this aim because it models the complexity of classroom processes, articulating interactions between style and practice, and developing methods that help teachers understand this interplay so they can increase their instructional effectiveness. In the educational psychology classes I teach, talking with students...
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about classroom management in terms of teacher style pushes my students beyond their initial conceptions of management as the exercise of control and their serious concerns about losing control. As I watch my students wrestle with the concepts of control and nurturance, when to lighten up and when to tighten up, I push them to consider how these two teaching dimensions interact: Can you establish effective control without also demonstrating nurturance? Do positive teacher–student relationships always result in better learning outcomes? I push them because I know some of the answers; I also push them because I am seeking answers myself.

References


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