

School Effectiveness: A Bandwagon
in Search of a Tune

Kenneth A. Sirotnik

CSE Report no. 214
1983

Center for the Study of Evaluation
Graduate School of Education
University of California, Los Angeles

Progressive education.... Yeah! Back to the basics.... Yeah! Open classrooms.... Yeah! Time on task.... Yeah! Mastery learning.... Yeah! Behavioral Objectives.... Yeah! New math.... Yeah! Clinical teaching.... Yeah! School effectiveness.... Yeah! Let's hear it again: Principal Leadership.... Hip Hip Hooray! Academic Emphasis.... Hip Hip Hooray! Discipline and Order.... Hip Hip Hooray! High Expectations.... Hip Hip Hooray! Achievement Standards.... Hip Hip Hooray!....If this hasn't tired you out yet, the smörgåsbord of corresponding in-service programs will.

Many of us who have devoted a significant portion of our professional lives to education have done so on the assumption that schools can and do make a difference. And we've gathered a lot of experiential data to support it. We have started out relatively ignorant in life and ended up relatively educated. Much of this change was due not to our parents, TV, the clergy or the Cub Scouts -- although significant contributions can be identified in these educational resources -- but to attending school. Moreover, as observers of, and teachers in, schools and classrooms, we've seen the spectrum from the exceptionally good to the exceptionally bad. We have little doubt, therefore, that schools can make a difference all right, and that students might be better off not being in some of them.

So when the era of Coleman et al. (1966) occurred, we didn't buy into the attendant misinterpretations of the data, viz., that schools don't make a difference. It seemed fairly obvious that aggregates of data (i.e., standardized achievement scores) reflecting social inequities

at the school level would naturally correlate highly with other school level indicators of social economic status. The myriad of processes and their variance within schools was untouched by this line of research. Our response, therefore, was kind of "ho hum" -- we still know (1) schools have effects, (2) social inequities are pervasive within and between schools, (3) there are many potentially good things school staffs could do that would increase their effectiveness, and (4) the real dilemma is to figure out how schools can become more open to meaningful and sustained change efforts.

But the research community (as well as critics at large) -- in the tradition of their empirical analytic heritage -- cannot be content with a critical analysis of extant knowledge. Sometimes it seems necessary to "prove" the obvious with "objective" data. Having been seduced any number of times by this inquiry paradigm myself, I am sympathetic with the ostensible motivation behind the post-Coleman era of school effectiveness research and, particularly, with Edmonds' intent to dispel the pernicious myth that low SES, minority schools are somehow always destined to be ineffective. The game plan is fairly straightforward: (1) Pick a politically defensible criterion of "effectiveness" -- standardized achievement test scores; (2) Identify some schools that have test score means way beyond or below what would be expected based upon their SES indicators; (3) Find out what seems to be different about these more and less "effective" schools.

Notwithstanding the various methodological difficulties in this kind

of research design,¹ what are the emerging conclusions? We find the best that our conventional wisdom about schooling has to offer. We invented the principalship presumably because we thought leadership was important. Discipline and control has been a perennial preoccupation for both the public and the schools. Wasting time on non-instructional activities is not ordinarily advocated as sound pedagogical practice. Probably the most consistent movement in American education has been the call-to-arms for the basic 3-Rs.

In any case, we now have some "hard" data suggesting that some schools are more effective than we might have expected. If this is enough to stimulate and raise the moral and political consciousness (and consciences) of voters and politicians as to issues of inequity and the poverty of educational budgets, then all the better. No harm done. No harm, that is, until the concept is subverted, attractively packaged, and the hard sell is underway. Banners, buttons, and slogans have burst upon the scene.² Principals and teachers have received mandates from their superintendents. After all, if some school in Detroit can do it, so can you.... the research is clear, go do it! And state superintendents are getting into the swing of things with their interpretations of the best that current research has to offer. Here in California, one of the answers seems to be More Homework.... Yeah! (We're still waiting to find out who's going to grade it.)

I have a confession to make. I believe in academically engaged learning time, strong curricular leadership in the school's administrative structure, orderly and non-disruptive classroom learning environments, rigorous

and curriculum-based achievement monitoring, and the mastery of basic academic skills. (Do you know anyone who doesn't?) Moreover, I believe -- along with the architects of every formal, state/district curriculum document ever constructed -- that the social, personal and career functions of schooling are also important, i.e., that critical thinking, becoming a cooperative and contributing citizen, learning to be a responsible decision-maker, and so on are also legitimate aspirations for the schooling enterprise.³ Thus, I believe in a whole host of other viable instructional strategies such as cooperative learning, student decision-making, individualization, and flexibility and variety in activities (role play, simulation, field trips, etc.).

Strangely enough, as the results come in from all over the country where attempts to replicate effective schooling are taking place, the champions of school effectiveness are adding new variables (like those above) to their original lists of half a dozen or so "principles." In other words, they are discovering that not all the original "principles" need to be in place for "effective" schools and there exist a host of other variables that may or may not contribute to effectiveness. Thus we are told⁴ that we should take some comfort in the fact that not only is there some overlap in the various "school effectiveness" lists,⁵ but there is also considerable variety in the equally important left-overs. The irony, of course, is that as these lists grow into eclectic compendiums of the most touted pedagogical practices, they inevitably include "empirically" contradictory recommendations. An example is the wonderful

list in the special issue of Educational Researcher on effective schools (Mackenzie, 1983). Here we find in the same array of dimensions of effective schooling, the principles of academically engaged learning time, content coverage, and formative testing on the one hand and, on the other, things such as cooperative learning, group interaction, and personal interaction between teacher and students. The time-on-task literature, concentrating solely on achievement outcomes, has, of course, found negative correlations between these two clusters of instructional practices. Obviously, it is not a right-wrong/either-or issue; it's an issue of enlightened and creative combining of multiple strategies to achieve a variety of schooling outcomes.

So we're back to where we started: We know a lot of good stuff about improving teaching and learning but it's damn complicated, difficult to replicate, and highly dependent upon specific contextual circumstances in different districts and at different schools. And as much as I believe in all the "dimensions of effective schooling" -- those already catalogued and those yet to be -- I also believe in the conclusion that is being derived over and over again by those trying to figure out why schooling innovations have a long history of failure.⁶ Even with the best of intentions, new programs thrust upon people in their own workplace have little chance of survival.⁷

But the chances increase substantially when people who spend their daily work life in schools are involved from the beginning, when they have the opportunity to relate to their own successes and failures from their own points of reference, when they can examine new knowledge in

light of their own beliefs and practices -- in short, when they are treated as professionals and provided genuine opportunities for critical inquiry.⁸ Common sense tells us that human beings engaged in the process of developing others' intellectual capabilities must be allowed to use their own. They must be encouraged to be, in the true sense of the word, philosophical regarding the meaning and practice of their own profession. These ideas are not new -- they are steeped in a long line of American tradition in education:

Concrete educational experience is the primary source of all inquiry and reflection because it sets the problems, and tests, modifies, confirms or refutes the conclusions of intellectual investigation. The philosophy of education neither originates nor settles ends. It occupies an intermediate and instrumental or regulative place. Ends actually reached, consequences that actually accrue, are surveyed, and their values estimated in the light of a general scheme of values. (Dewey, 1929, p. 56.)

So long as we minimize this aspect of professional life, the best of our innovative intentions will remain "non-events" in the educational history books on change.

And so another schooling bandwagon rolls by with its cacophony of quick 'n easy answers to the wrong questions. People will jump on only to fall by the wayside and await the next parade. Our hope, of course, lies in the significant numbers of researchers and practitioners who are unwilling to put aside inquiry into the complexity of schooling and the problem of change.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Purkey and Smith (1982) and Rowan, Bossert and Dwyer (1983).
2. I've started my own "folk art" collection of these artifacts. Recently, I have heard of a proposal for flying an E-flag when a school records achievement gains. If any of you know where I could get one -- a flag that is -- I'd be most appreciative.
3. Clearly, the criterion currently in vogue for identifying the "effective" schools is exceedingly narrow.
4. I am referring specifically to messages conveyed by Edmonds, Brookover, and Lezotte at AERA, 1983 in the session entitled "Research on Effective Schools: State of the Art."
5. Examples are Edmonds and Frederikson (1978); Brookover et al. (1979); Rutter et al. (1979).
6. See, for example, Berman and McLaughlin's (1978) analysis of major federally funded programs and the findings from collaborative research in the review by Ward and Tikunoff (1982).
7. Current "programs" of school effectiveness seem to be basically this: (1) develop a survey questionnaire with some agree-disagree items that appear to "get at" the various dimensions of effectiveness; (2) administer the survey to school staff, aggregate responses and diagnose the weaknesses; (3) conduct in-service workshops around special topics that would seem to bear some relationship to the targetted dimensions in need of improvement. Does this sound familiar? It's been going on for decades.
8. We have expanded this notion in considerable detail. Those interested may wish to read Oakes and Sirotnik (1983). (See also Heckman, Oakes, and Sirotnik, 1983.)

REFERENCES

- Berman, P., & McLaughlin, M. W. Federal programs supporting educational change: Implementing and sustaining innovations (Vol. VIII). Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1978.
- Brookover, W. B., Beady, C. H., Flood, P. K., Schweitzer, J., & Wisenbaker, J. School social systems and student achievement: Schools can make a difference. New York: Praeger, 1979.
- Coleman, J. S., Campbell, E. G., Hobson, C. J., McPartland, J. M., Mood, A. M., Weinfeld, F. D., & York, R. L. Equality of educational opportunity. Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1966.
- Dewey, J. The sources of a science of education. New York: Liveright, 1929.
- Edmonds, R. R., & Frederiksen, J. R. Search for effective schools: The identification and analysis of city schools that are instructionally effective for poor children. Cambridge, Mass.: Center for Urban Studies, 1978.
- Heckman, P., Oakes, J., & Sirotnik, K. A. Expanding the concepts of school renewal and change. Educational Leadership, 1983, 40, 26-32.
- Mackenzie, D. E. Research for school improvement: An appraisal of some recent trends. Educational Researcher, 1983, 12, 5-17.
- Oakes, J., & Sirotnik, K. A. An immodest proposal: From critical theory to critical practice for school renewal. Paper presented at the conference of the American Educational Research Association, 1983.
- Purkey, S. C., & Smith, M. S. Effective schools: A review. Paper presented at the National Invitational Conference on Translating Research on Teaching into Practice, Arlington, VA., 1982.
- Rowan, B., Bossert, S. T., & Dwyer, D. C. Research on effective schools: A cautionary note. Educational Researcher, 1983, 12, 24-31.
- Rutter, M., Maugham, B., Moritmore, P., Ouston, J., & Smith, A. Fifteen thousand hours: Secondary schools and their effects on children. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- Ward, B. A., & Tikunoff, W. J. Collaborative research. Paper presented at the National Invitational Conference on Translating Research on Teaching into Practice, Arlington, VA., 1982.