Reconsidering school effectiveness research for the needs of the future school

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws attention on the need to reevaluate the aims and the rationale of school effectiveness research, in order to serve more accurately and effectively the educational needs of the schools in the future. The definitions as well as the development of appropriate methods to measure school effectiveness, is illustrated. However, a number of critics about defining and measuring school effectiveness was developed. Despite all the criticism, significant factors and key characteristics of effectiveness seem to be closely related with school improvement whose supporters highlight the existence of facilitating factors that affect progress. Schools can make a difference even though there aren’t any quick fixes. Additionally, the social and cultural context within which education takes place should be taken into account. In this respect, ‘effectiveness’ could only be realized if all the components of the educational process will be an integral part of any research procedure.

Introduction - Definitions of school effectiveness

Much research in the field of school effectiveness was conducted the last two decades (Mortimore, 1991a; Sammons, 1994). The term 'school effectiveness' has been used to describe educational research concerned with exploring differences within and between schools (Goldstein, 1997). It also focuses on pupils’ progress that might be expected considering their background and initial attainment (Mortimore, 1991a). Nevertheless, school effectiveness research seeks to describe what an effective school looks like. It was described as "one in which pupils progress further than might be expected from consideration of its intake" (Mortimore, 1991a, p.9). An effective school adds extra value to its students’ outcomes in comparison with other schools. The ‘value-added’ is the concept that used to describe this procedure (Sammons et al, 1995). In addition, one of the main objectives of school effectiveness research is concerned with the exploration of "explanatory and outcome factors using appropriate models" (Goldstein, 1997, p.369). Therefore, it is of main importance to develop adequate and reliable ways to measure the quality of the school (Mortimore, 1991b).

The ‘multi-level modelling’ was the statistical technique of quantitative research, which was adopted from school effectiveness researchers in order to investigate the various factors that might influence pupils’ performance (Goldstein, 1987).

Measuring school effectiveness

The methodological development of ‘multi-level modelling’ techniques helped to improve the estimation of school effects (Creemers, 1994). Researchers could explore differences between schools in the characteristics of their students’ intakes. All the differences could be taken into account and therefore they could be included in the analysis of schools’ quality (Sammons et al, 1995). Moreover, special emphasis was based on the issues of consistency and stability in schools’ effects upon different kinds of outcome and over time (Reynolds et al, 1994). Ensuring validity and efficiency, these measurements seek to investigate research data with more sophisticated methods. Unlike league tables and raw data, the multi-level modelling approach is successful in taking into account a variety of relevant factors in its judgments (Goldstein and Spiegelhalter, 1996; Goldstein, 1997).

In addition, multi-level modelling techniques allow investigation of differential effectiveness. In that sense, the notion of overall effectiveness is highly questionable. Some researchers within the field are very cautious about biases concerned with judgments about effective schools (Goldstein et al, 1993; Goldstein, 1997; Coe and Fitz-Gibbon, 1998). Whether or not some schools are more or less effective for particular student groups (boys or girls, low or high ability pupils, students from several ethnic groups or pupils with free school meal eligibility) should be a matter of careful consideration for all researchers (Goldstein et al, 1993; Sammons et al, 1995; Goldstein, 1997; Coe and Fitz-Gibbon, 1998). Ultimately, "to attempt to summarize school differences, even after adjusting the intake, sex and ethnic background of the students and fixed characteristics of the schools in a single quantity is misleading" (Nuttall et al. 1989), if particular performance indicators are not chosen for monitoring systematically the appropriate features of quality (Fitz-Gibbon, 1994).

School effectiveness and effective schools

To what extent schools do have substantial effects upon pupils, was developed from several school effectiveness researchers. Major studies showed that specific factors could be linked with effectiveness. In the important research of British secondary schools (Rutter et al. 1979) significant factors were outlined:

- The pupil control system
- The school environment provided for pupils
- The involvement of pupils
- The academic development of pupils
- The behavior of teachers
- The management in the classroom
Similarly, the earliest study of Mortimore et al (1988) in primary schools, twelve key characteristics of effective schools were illustrated:

1. Purposeful leadership of the staff by the head-teacher
2. The involvement of the deputy head-teacher
3. The involvement of teachers
4. Consistency among teachers
5. Structured lessons
6. Intellectually challenging teaching
7. Work-centered environment
8. Limited focus within sessions
9. Maximum communication between teachers and students
10. Record keeping
11. Parental involvement
12. Positive climate

Some of the previous findings about the characteristics of effective secondary and primary British schools were also identified in the other side of the Atlantic. In the U.S.A. the ‘five factor’ theory of school effectiveness was established in order to describe schools with high academic performance (Lezotte, 1989):

- strong principal leadership and attention to the quality of instruction
- a pervasive and broadly understood instructional focus
- an orderly, safe climate conducive to teaching and learning
- teacher behaviors that convey the expectation that all students are expected to obtain at least a basic mastery of simple skills
- the use of measures of pupil achievement as the basis for program evaluation.

The above findings raised questions about the objections of teachers and scholars that schools cannot make a difference because it was home background or social disadvantage which was the reason why children underachieve in school (Reynolds, 1994).

Additionally, severe criticism was developed from several researchers about the efficiency of such approaches (Angus, 1993; Hamilton, 1996). School effectiveness research was accused for trying to isolate important contextual factors that influence students’ performance. In fact, the idea that some schools might be characterized as ‘ineffective’ by assumptions about their deficiency seems to be very damaging since schools may be charged with students’ outcomes over which they have little control. (Coe and Fitz-Gibbon, 1998). Moreover, the lack of longitudinal data in school effectiveness research (Coe and Fitz-Gibbon, 1998), gives the impression that school effects are homogenized and in that sense, unquestionable and applicable in every situation, in every school, while at the same time, there is a strong connection between correlation and causation (Fitz-Gibbon, 1996).

Ultimately, despite any positive, as well as negative, results and overall achievements, the issue of school effectiveness, seems to be unavoidable linked with the school improvement paradigm, as it is very likely that careful monitoring of school improvement attempts would provide the knowledge for effective initiatives (Fitz-Gibbon, 1996).

An introduction to school improvement

Work in school improvement has been pioneered as a result of research into school effectiveness. The central objective of school improvement lies on schools’ responsibility to change (Stoll and Fink, 1996). Even though it is widely known that schools are too complex and therefore there aren’t any quick fixes, the school improvement supporters claim that there is a substantial number of facilitating factors that affect progress (Stoll and Myers, 1998). Regarding pupils’ outcomes (including behavior as well as attainment), the management of learning, the curriculum, the pedagogy, resources and the state of premises, the school improvement advocates seek to enhance improvement and reduce failure (Mortimore and Whitty, 1997). In addition, school improvement is from the 1980’s regarded as a more practitioner-oriented field as it is concerned with school’s self evaluation, as well as with the teacher’s role as a researcher (Stoll and Riley, 1999). However, it is clear that there isn’t a recipe book for improvement. There are many different types of schools. Therefore, there is a variety of ways for a school to be effective. Several researchers were focused on multiple and complex interpretations of reality. Effectiveness can be seen through many dimensions. Ultimately, changing practice requires time and effort to develop new skills as well as new attitudes in line with the will to change (Stoll and Myers, 1998).

The need for change

The fundamental changes that need to be employed are not only concerned with the educational practice per se, but with the broader social and cultural contexts within which education takes place (Mortimore and Whitty, 1997). It is not surprising that the research for effectiveness found its origins in the phenomenon of the ineffective school (Edmonds, 1979). If schools were perfect, fulfilling their missions to the great satisfaction of pupils, teachers, parents, policy makers, nobody would ever have thought about more or less effectiveness. If schools were a perfect work–environment for teachers, nobody would ever have wanted to start a process of school improvement with teachers through convincing them that improving their own performance is the right thing to do. Therefore, the work on school effectiveness should be rather concerned with these interrelated issues.

The importance of core characteristics and conditions for effectiveness was illustrated in the previous section. They applied to those schools which are most effective in promoting progress or those schools whose performance was continually improving over time whether they be large or small, rural or urban, primary or secondary (Hillman, 1996). Nevertheless, the findings of school effectiveness
research shouldn't be provided as an instant recipe to transform schools. Focusing on the ‘black box’ of school without taking into account factors within and beyond school does not seem to explain adequately ineffectiveness. A systematic, sustained effort is needed in order to fulfill the premises of effectiveness.

Changing school effectiveness research for the future school

The realization that "schools in different contexts have different capacities, potential and limits" is underlined by researchers in the field (Lauder et al., 1998, p.63), who introduce the contextual model in order to identify the parameters that contribute to schools' performance. According to these academics it is highly questionable that the effectiveness of specific schools could be sustained. Schools in disadvantaged areas might well raise their achievement levels for a time but this does not in any case assume that positive outcomes will be sustained over time. As far as we are concerned there isn’t any research evidence that improves the opposite (Coe and Fitz-Gibbon, 1998). If this is the case, it is suggested that research should be longitudinal and should consider questions such as the impact of school’s community, intake and educational market on its performance; the conditions under which schools perform better and possible ways to develop contextual criteria for holding schools accountable (Lauder et al., 1998). It is obvious that this view is not only concerned with what happens in the school’s process but it also investigates the ways with which school-community relationship will be better organized. This argument was particularly stressed by scholars from the field of the sociology of education (Angus, 1993). For whom and in whose interests schools are to be effective or ineffective should be a matter of great consideration. There are fears pointing out that failing to introduce issues of micro and macro analysis and their effect on education will result in ignoring structured inequalities of class, gender and race issues (Angus, 1993; Mortimore and Whitty, 1997; Lauder et al, 1998).

Additionally, the importance of teachers’ professional role as facilitators for effectiveness should be acknowledged. Their attitudes about effectiveness and thereby effective teaching and learning should be a matter of great concern as well. Apart from any research findings it is also significantly important to convince teachers about the positive features of such findings and make them to adopt these in their educational practice (Wikeley, 1998).

Conclusions - What should we expect from school effectiveness research?

The increasing demands of the market place and its impact upon the educational policy and practice should be primarily included in the concerns of school effectiveness research. There is an ongoing discussion about educational institutions and their ‘clients’ (Townsend et al., 1999). This discourse signifies the changes that had been occurred through the years. In a market driven educational system, schools compete with each other with efforts to enlarge their catchment areas by pleasing their clients and ensuring success in their educational careers. In such an educational system, educational authorities look for means to measure the quality of the educational product by simply measuring the effectiveness of the components of the educational system. All workers in the educational arena are evaluated in terms of their results and are rewarded accordingly. The whole system becomes more and more selective. This situation leads to an increasing competition between schools and educational departments. The publication of league tables is an inseparable part of this struggle.

In this respect it would be fruitful to reconsider even the term of ‘school effectiveness’. It might well be ‘educational effectiveness’ as Harvey Goldstein suggested (2001). In that sense, all the components of the educational process should be included in the interests of the research. Partners from across society should be involved in this approach (Stoll and Fink, 1996; Mortimore and Whitty, 1997) so that any problems with effectiveness would be only regarded in the area of educational service. In the meantime the expression of ‘school effectiveness’ should be treated with caution. For some authors it would be better if we could talk about the "adjusted academic performance" of specific groups (Coe and Fitz-Gibbon, 1998, p.433).

Moreover, in choosing the outcomes to be measured, we should allow for the fact that different objectives may be appropriate for different students. We should measure what we value but not what is available or convenient. This has serious implications for the validity of the measured outcomes. It might very easily lead in a 'constructed' effectiveness or ineffectiveness respectively. School effectiveness researchers specialized on statistics have warned us about the dangers of such approaches earlier in this work (Goldstein et al., 1993; Goldstein, 1997).

In line with what stated above, the impact of using group-variables as gender, sexuality, class or ethnicity as whether they used in order to promote stereotypes about the differential effectiveness of specific groups, is a matter of serious concern. It seems more than apparent that nowadays, it is the school that is held more accountable for whether or not children perform academically and socially, since it is the school which is seen as responsible for pupils’ success or failure.

Overall, more and better evidence on how schools and teachers can influence the measured outcomes is needed so that schools and teachers would not be judged for any outcomes that are beyond their power to change.

References


