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EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS: REALITY OR UTOPIA?

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Abstract. What makes a school effective? In particular, what are the characteristics of effective schools as perceived by researchers? Research studies (e.g., Purkey and Smith, 1983; Heck, Larsen and Marcoulides, 1990; Scheurich and Skrla, 2003) on effective schools have yielded lists of characteristics on effective schools. However the characteristics are not absolute, but are directly related to the social-cultural framework and the values that reflect the school, the educational staff, the students and the general social-economical frame of the school. The critical questions to be addressed in this study are: 1.The effective school, occupying by effective teachers is a utopia or can be accomplished? 2. Which are the key factors that affect effectiveness of a school? 3. How the finding of studies for effective schools can be adapted to the demands and needs of each school? In these questions the present article tries to give answers.

Keywords: effective schools, effectiveness, characteristics of effective schools, effective school studies

Introduction

The request for the improvement of education is today equally important as it was in the beginning of the century. The social and political changes that occurred during the last four decades have effected, some in greater extent and others in smaller the educational system of divert societies, since the educational system of a society is a reflection of the social system which is applied and at the same time is the same power that evolves it and refreshes it. In this changing social environment each social educational system attempts to fulfil its mission in order to help the effectiveness of the school units. But, which is the school that can be accepted as effective and survive in the open and complicated social environment as it is evolving around us?

School effectiveness: a controversial issue

Effectiveness is generally assumed as the capability of producing a desired effect (American Heritage, 2000) and as the quality of the ability to bring about a desired effect. As the keyword here is "desired effect" it clearly implies that it involves the fulfillment of criteria based on a term of reference. Schreens (2000) however argues that the literary meaning of effectiveness is goal attainment and hence the criteria used to measure performance reflect important educational objectives.

The complexity of defining effectiveness will invariably result in the difficulty in defining or understanding school effectiveness. Researchers give different definition or meaning to this term.

Reynolds et al. (1994: 93) reported that "*The lack of a common operational definition of an effective school may cause problems in comparing results across a variety of studies ranging in such operational definitions*". If every researcher is searching for different things or gives a different meaning to school effectiveness then the results of the various school effectiveness studies cannot be compared or discussed in a manner that will promote school effectiveness research in a productive way.

Edmonds (1979: 16) defined school effectiveness as the ability of the school to "*Bring the children of the poor to those minimal masteries of basic school skills that now describe minimally successful pupil performance for the children of the middle class*". This definition implies that poor children are less able than those of the middle or the upper class and that are in a worse position as far as their development. This assumption however cannot be accepted. It is very difficult to determine the levels of minimally successful pupil performance for children of the middle class in order for the poor children to be able to try to reach them. Also, the school must have the ability to recognize the needs of its pupils and environment's needs, and work under those given conditions in promoting its goals. In addition, the school must have the ability to maximize all pupils' development. A school should be effective for all its pupils and for all aspects of schooling and not only those of the poor, middle or upper class.

Mortimore (1991a) defined a school as effective when students' progress, in consideration of its intake, is further than might be expected. It is a school that adds extra value to the outcomes of its student in comparison with other schools serving similar intakes. In other words if a school is expected to achieve 70% of the predetermined goal, due to its intake, and it in fact achieves more, then this school is considered as effective. Analysing Mortimore's definition one can recognize that in order to make judgments on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of a school, one must then compare it with schools serving similar intakes. But we also need to look for specific goals and objectives that the school can achieve, and if those are possible to achieve then one can compare it with schools that have the same goals and objectives. Levine and Lezotte (1990) defined effectiveness as the production of a desired result or outcome. This definition, even though it is not complete, sets the direction that school effectiveness must be judged according to its goals and objectives.

Sammons (1994) argued that the definitions of school effectiveness depend upon a variety of factors such as the sample of schools examined, choice of outcome measures, adequate control for differences between schools in intakes to ensure that "like is compared with like", methodology, timescale et cetera. Although Sammons

set the directions of a definition of school effectiveness, in the end she did not propose a specific definition encompassing all those characteristics and directions that could form complete definition. Likewise, Stoll and Fink (1996) identified four aspects that should be investigated in order to define a school as effective:

If it promotes progress for all its pupils beyond what would be expected.

If it ensures that each pupil achieves the highest standards possible.

If it enhances all aspects of pupil achievement and development.

If it continues to improve from year to year.

Their identification of the four aspects is very important because they set at the center of school effectiveness research the pupil, and yet they do not neglect the role of the school as a learning organization that must continue to improve from year to year.

Morley and Rasool (1999) view school effectiveness as a change being brought about by a greater focus on the school as an entity that is to be managed. School effectiveness is also argued as an example of a new managerialism in education where there is a combination of culture management (the creation of purposes and meaning) with performance management i.e. measuring what really matters (Morley and Rasool, 1999: 59 – 60). Hence a managerial perspective of school effectiveness is evolved here adding a new dimension to the perspective of school effectiveness.

Though studies give various perspectives of what constitutes school effectiveness or what an effective school is, the diversified views lead as to cohere with the conclusion that: *'...while all reviews assume that effective schools can be differentiated from ineffective ones, there is no consensus yet on just what constitutes an effective school'*(Reid, Hopkins and Holly, 1987: 22).

Schreerens (2000) in presenting a paper to the International Institute of Educational planning under UNESCO adds that '*School effectiveness is a difficult concept to define and once defined is of a nature difficult to reason'*. He adds further that school effectiveness is a field characterized by many approaches, concepts and models. It is difficult even to have a clear grasp of the pros and cons of each (Schreerens, 2000: 7 – 9). Hence the concept of school effectiveness has various approaches and is a complex issue and hence the lack of consensus on what exactly constitutes as school effectiveness is not a surprise.

In reviewing early School Effectiveness Research in the USA, Firestone (1991: 2) noted that *'Effectiveness is not a neutral term. Defining the effectiveness of a particular school always requires choices among competing values'*. Hence he further adds that *'the criteria of effectiveness will be a subject of political debate'*.

An overall perspective that emerges here is that school effectiveness involves a focus on outcomes and whether it exceeded its desired goals. The outcomes could be purely measures of academic achievement (Willims, 1992; Hoy and Miskel, 2001) theought to be consistently positive. They are argued from an input-output

perspective and in a broader perspective, the product of 'value added' to schooling or the overall personal development of students. The arguments of a multi-dimensional facet of school effectiveness (Morley and Rasool, 1999) reflect the complexity of the concept of school effectiveness. Hence school effectiveness needs to rest on a broad perspective that it is the ability of a school to exceed its desired goals, taking into consideration of differences between students in its intake. It may be in line with Mortimore's widely accepted view of an effective school (Mortimore, 1991a) but it differs from the viewpoint that the goals need not be purely academic in nature as broader 'value-added' functions of schooling emerge.

In a few words, "effectiveness" in the area of school units is a multi-dimensional concept since no absolute criteria can include the complex nature of it, nor some of the targets of the school unit like the "creating of conceptions", the "believes", the "creation of consciousness" of the students etc. can be counted. Besides, from researches of the part decades regarding the effectiveness of the school units there is no specific theory, which explains what is that, which identifies the effective school. Besides all that, the researches brought to the light factors important to the effective functions of the school units.

Effective school studies

What makes a school effective? What factors are responsible for making some schools more effective than others? Research on school effectiveness has yielded an impressive number of factors related to school effectiveness. The vast majority of this research, beginning with the Coleman Report published in the U.S. in 1966 in response to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, has dealt with high poverty schools. President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration released the two-volume report, *On Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Coleman et al., 1966) that is widely regarded as the one of the most important education studies of the 20th century. In 1999, Dr. Albert Beaten stated, when speaking about the Coleman Report, "*I don't think there's anything close to it. It changed the way we thought about the whole issue of equality of educational opportunity*" (Hoff, 1999: 33). Beaton helped analyze the date for the Educational Testing Service. This seminal and controversial work, written by the sociologist James S. Coleman (1966) of Johns Hopkins University, proposed that family background and the socioeconomic makeup of the student body are the principle, and possibly the only, predictors of successful schools.

Coleman's et al. (1966) research followed the diatribes of Admiral H.G.Rickover against the spirit of Dewey's progressive education and the perceived failures of the American education system after the launch of Sputnik in 1957. Rickover was deeply concerned that the Soviets were going to overwhelm the "Free World" after their technological feat of beating the U.S. into space. Rickover believed that the math and science courses of the 1950's had failed to provide the U.S. industrial and military complex with competent engineers. He particularly blamed Dewey's

progressive education model for what he believed was the steady deterioration of secondary-school curricula.

In Britain, the public debate of the 1950's and 1960's pointed to the overwhelming restrictions placed on the population by the ingrained social order. The divided public education system that had taken shape in the nineteenth century seemed to clearly limit educational opportunities based on class. The subsequent fight by British educators and politicians to recognize schools reinforced the logic that schooling practices must be important in determining the social and economic future of children. The Plowden Committee Report (1967), "Children and Their Primary Schools", stressed the powerful impact of parental background, expectations and attitudes on children's educational performance, but the report did not undermine the British school systems as significantly as Coleman's conclusions had in the U.S. the year previously (Silver, 1994). In the shades of Admiral Rickover, a series of 'Black Papers' written by C.B. Cox and others during the late 60's through the mid '70's, held 'progressive education' responsible for the lowering of educational standards in the U.K. (Cox, Boyson, and Amis, 1975; Cox, Dyson and Amis, 1968).

Coleman's paper, "Equality of Educational Opportunity", examined the concept of education in terms of its meaning to society. This federally sponsored ground breaking report involved 4000 randomly selected elementary and secondary schools, 570,000 pupils, and 60,000 teachers from across the United States. His research conclusions stated that schools did not really make a large difference in the educational success of its pupils. He stated that the socio-economic status of the family was the key indicators of school success. Using regression analysis, Coleman (1966:325) determined that "*schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context*". In his analysis he contended that only 5 – 9 per cent of the total variance in individual student achievement was uniquely accounted for by conditions in the school while almost 35 percent of the variance in individual achievement was attributable to the differences between the schools. Coleman stated that the large variation range was due to disparity in the between schools effect for different cultural groups: there was more variance between schools in the achievement scores of Mexican-American, American Indians, Puerto Ricans and Afro-Americans in the southern states. While Afro-American in the northern states had less variance between schools in their scores (Coleman et al., 1966).

Coleman (1967: 193) summarized the learning problems of urban schools by concluding, "*Minority groups are consistently exposed to schools with a greater average number of problems than are whites, including property destruction, impertinence to teachers, racial tension, stealing, physical violence, drinking and the use of narcotics.*" He asked the question, "*Whose obligation is it to provide equal educational opportunities or does it have inherent contradictions and conflicts with the prevailing social organization of the population*".

The Plowden Committee Report (1967: 35) produced by the Central Advisory Council for Education in England and officially titled 'Children and their Primary Schools', was the United Kingdom's counterpart to the Coleman Report. The Plowden Report reached a similar conclusion as to the importance of schooling when compared to the influences of the family structure and socio-economic status. The report stated, 'Differences between parents will explain more of the variation in the children than differences between schools'. Parental attitudinal factors, in fact, accounted for 58 percent of the variance in student achievement in this study. (Teddie and Reynolds, 2000).

In 1972 Jencks combined the data from the Coleman report with data from several other research studies and concluded that student achievement or economic success in later life did not depend on schools. In support of Coleman's findings they states that the research lead them to the conclusion that success in school and success in their future economic life was largely determined by the characteristics of their home environment (Jencks, 1972).

A number of educational researchers cried foul and sought to counter the findings of Coleman (1967) and Jencks (1972). They believed that the estimation of the size of effects of the school was questionable and that the statistical analysis was flawed. Researchers subsequent to the Coleman Report tried to improve their research design and analytical processes in order to obtain more reliable results, and to show that schools were more effective than the Coleman Report concluded.

In his book entitled 'The Impact of School Resources on the Learning of Inner City Children', Murnane (1975) concluded that both classroom and school assignment had a major effect on student achievement. He found in his research that the reported student achievement scores increased significantly when classroom and school assignment were added to the effect of prior achievement and student background variables. Murnane believed that Coleman's decision to enter the variables of the home situation into the regression equation before the school variable '*biased the analysis against finding the school variables important*' (Murnane, 1975: 9).

Summers and Wolfe (1977: 652) in their study of elementary students in Philadelphia concluded "*the empirical investigations have failed to find potent school effects because the aggregative nature of the data used disguised the school's true impact*". Others believed that the using of norm referenced tests to measure school achievement was less sensitive to the school's overall effect on student achievement. Madaus and his colleagues instead used criterion referenced tests and concluded that school and classroom factors explained a larger proportion of the variance (Madaus et al., 1980). Payne and Biddle (1999: 5) contended that the Coleman Report "*used flawed procedures for statistical analysis, and these had generated falsely inflated estimates for the effects of home-background factors and falsely deflated estimates for school effects*".

Brookover and Erickson (1975) believed that school climate could be a powerful predictor of student achievement. In their study of a random sample of elementary schools in Michigan (n=68) they were the first to use simultaneous principal, teacher, and student questionnaires that looked at a number of climate variables. They found a significant correlation between climate factors and student achievement leading to their conclusion that the school does have a significant effect on student achievement when the actual school variables that have the greatest effect are studied.

Twenty years after the Coleman Report however, economist Erik Hanushek (1986) summarized the results of 112 research studies which investigated school inputs comparable to those Coleman considered, i.e. per pupil expenditure, school facilities, teacher years of experience, and their correlation to student achievement on standardized tests. In a report more than two decades later, his conclusions were similar to Coleman's. He found that there is little verifiable evidence that increases in expenditure at the school level has a dependable influence on student achievement.

The head teacher's role was identified as one of the most important factors for school effectiveness (e.g. Edmonds, 1979; Levine and Lezotte, 1990; Mortimore et al., 1988). Cheng (1986) investigated how school effectiveness is related to the principal; s style and organizational climate and the importance of organizational factors in determining school performance. He found that the organizational factors were very important in determining school performance. On the other hand, Brown (1987) studied the role of school – based management in students' achievements finding that school based management did not appear to produce higher – grade scores. Most of these studies found that the role of head teacher is essential in promoting effectiveness at school and classroom level on various elements such as pupils' achievements, school climate, parental involvement et cetera. This recognition show that organizational factors are very important in determining school effectiveness and that a school must be effective both at school and at classroom level.

Characteristics that contribute to effective schools

An important part of school effectiveness research was the identification of certain characteristics in schools that showed more effectiveness than did other schools with similar status. In other words, the studies produced a list of all those characteristics that seemed to describe those schools that could be recognized as « effective » due to their outstanding work in comparison to other schools with similar status. The school effectiveness studies used various methods, different samples and investigated different countries or different areas of the same country (e.g., Edmonds, 1979; Purkey and Smith, 1983; Mortimore et al., 1988). One may acknowledge that many of those factors have common features even though they were identified in different periods of time, using different methods in various part of the world or even in different areas of the same country. This recognition adds to the validity of the school effectiveness research. The conditions under which any

educational research is applied are different for many reasons, such as the context, the time, the methodology and the methods used, the culture of those doing the research, the culture of those taking part in the research et cetera. Looking at the lists of the above studies we can see some common or similar characteristics:

1. The process of effective leadership
2. The process of effective teaching
3. Developing a pervasive focus on learning
4. Developing staff skills at the school site
5. Creating high expectations for all
6. Monitoring progress at all levels
7. Involving parents in productive and appropriate ways
8. Producing a positive school climate

Furthermore, after examining the development of school effectiveness research, it is clear that there is no definite and fixed combination of variables leading to school effectiveness, and by no means can the examination of various variables reveal the whole picture of school effectiveness. We may somehow conclude at this stage that several concepts have to be considered in the process of the examination of effectiveness.

Although some arguments are formulated against the use of all kinds of criteria, it is important to use more criteria than before in future research to determine effectiveness, especially in the areas of academic outcomes such as higher-order skills and meta-cognitive knowledge and skills.

Effectiveness levels themselves are not stable. For the purpose of school improvement, but also for the development of a theory on the question of what induces effective education, we need studies about schools in transition (Teddlie & Stringfield 1993). As stated by McPherson (1997: 186) *'any pupil can have a bad day, any school a bad year. Sensible judgments will therefore be based, not on snapshots, but on repeated measures of pupils and schools'*.

The method of studying effectiveness in school is seen to rest in a pragmatic challenge to researchers to integrate aspects of methodology, qualitative and quantitative, in order *"to define attainment…find ways of measuring it, …provide estimates of improved school effectiveness with school-based activities studies, … make clear the processes within schools which flow from the selected activities, and demonstrate how these processes impinge on the wider school community"* (Reynolds et al. 1993: 156).

However these characteristics are not absolute, but are directly related to the social and cultural frame and the values represented by the school, the educational staff, students and the more general social and economy frame of it.

Thus, a school, which is considered result full in a frame, can be considered result full in another. In general the results of the research related to the effectiveness of a school have substance and are applicable only when implemented within the

certain social-cultural frame since the factors of effectiveness are not translations but influences (MacBeath, 2001: 38).

It must be understood in depth that the school is not a homogenous substance, and this is the reason that we refer to the uniqueness of each school culture. Due to the uniqueness of the school organizations and of their sub-systems the term "the difference of effectiveness" has occur which is mentioned by MacBeath (2001: 39), confirming that in most successful schools there is also failure, and also some students are better than others. For this reason researchers consider that this matter has to be further studied in order to be clear how the school culture is working in schools and how this is connected with the broader social and cultural framework of the school.

Moreover, the issue of effectiveness is directly related to how each one of us is translating effectiveness. There is a different meaning of effective school in African countries than in European countries. There is a different opinion of a student for the effectiveness of a school than the opinion of the teachers or the head master of the same school. Thus, effectiveness includes the term of personal opinion and perspective.

The composition of a frame of effectiveness for a school will be applicable, not from the moment that is organized in papers but from the moment it becomes a subject of discussion within people that are directly related, which are no others than the teachers, the parents and even the students of a school. Maybe this is an important reason for the people making the suggestion, the designers and also the researchers to think that the school must – and is logical – to have different characteristics of effectiveness, based on the sub-systems that consist it and the broader social-cultural framework.

Conclusions

All that had been said consist the theoretical framework, which is based on researches of several years that define the special characteristics of the effective school and suggest models of school effectiveness. It is logical to have the question if the theories have been set during time can be applied.

We are in the society of knowledge and information. The same pace with which the knowledge is developed is the same with which is getting old (Mavrogiorgos, 1993). School, open in evolution and challenges of the modern era can overcome the crisis and the issues that characterize it and with long term, logical educational programming and optimize it in essence. Certainly a fully scientific and educationally full teacher is not enough in order to transform a school from an effective to effective. Each participant in the school unit has an important role in order to ensure the effectiveness of the system.

Quality effective school, with effective teachers must not be a utopia or a myth for the Cypriot status quo. It can be accomplished, if educational tactic and a system with values, product of a social dialog with all participants, take place.

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