

Effective schools and predictors of academic success

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Abstract: The present article aims at shedding light on the issue of school effectiveness and the most important predictors of academic success. More particularly, definitions of school effectiveness are being discussed, a historical review about effective schools is presented, whereas some of the most basic characteristics and qualities of effective schools are being investigated. Purposeful teaching, professional leadership, high expectations of all learners along with shared goals and vision constitute crucial factors that characterize school effectiveness worldwide. The issue of the organisational aspect of school along with leadership qualities are also highly evaluated. Additionally, predictors of academic success are being elaborated with emphasis on those beyond the terms of examination performance in an effort to implement policies so as to design a school system that is both fair and inclusive, an educational environment in which learning is a non-stop procedure.

Key words: school organisation, school effectiveness, academic success, purposeful teaching, professional leadership

Introduction

In the past few years there has been considerable research focused on defining the 'effective school'. However, a major difficulty has been the description of what exactly being an effective school means (Androutsou, 2013). Not surprisingly many definitions have been proposed but so far none have found universal acceptance. Governments as well as education systems around the world are searching desperately for that particular formula which will guarantee the effectiveness of school (Townsend, 1998). Writing on 'effective schools' had reached a saturation point in education publications. At least a dozen 'reviews of the literature' had been published, several prominent journals had devote 'special' issues to the topic, and the accumulated research (and researchers) feverishly crossed Western borders to 'apply' these findings in the Third World (Jansen, 1995).

Despite the proliferation of effective schools literature, serious weaknesses in the existing knowledge base still remain to be investigated. First of all, most reviews have argued within what could be called the effective schools paradigm. In other words, having accepted the notion that effective schools do really exist and that their characteristics can be modelled the task was then simply 'to get better at' measuring such characteristics. Second, much of the application of the effective schools research outside of the West has erroneously rested on fixed assumptions about schooling and resources transferred to the developing world.

It is quite obvious that one has to be extremely cautious in understanding and approaching the concept of school effectiveness. That is because it is not a unitary concept; rather it is complex, complicated, multi-dimensional, and therefore not reducible to single or simple measures.

1. Historical review on the effective schools

The issue of school effectiveness continues to dominate the literature of education management and administration up until today and is conceptualised differently by many authors. According to Beare et al. (1989), effectiveness equates with the fulfillment of objectives by the school; that is, if the school is able to attain its objectives, it is effective. Van der Bank (1994) on the other hand, views school effectiveness from a management perspective, averring that schools with effective management strategies, such as strong leadership by the principal, are highly effective. However, Van der Westhuizen (2002) contextualises school effectiveness within the school's organisational culture, and concludes that an organisation and its effectiveness lie in the effectiveness of its components. Macbeath & Mortimore (2001) and Marishane & Botha (2011), in turn, emphasize the significance of teaching and learning and effective leadership, as the core determinants of school effectiveness.

From the research literature on this issue it is also evident that a number of approaches had been applied in recent years to evaluate the effectiveness of schools. Cuttance (1994) avers that 'Quality Assurance' is crucial for evaluating school effectiveness, while Morley and Rassool (1999) hold that an effective school is simply a 'learning school', with all its principles and activities centered on learning by all involved in the educational (teaching and learning) process.

2. Characteristics and qualities concerning school effectiveness

In terms of school effectiveness it is possible to identify several characteristics of effective schools. For example, Rutter et al. (1979) identified eight main characteristics:

- school ethos;

- effective classroom management;
- high teacher expectations;
- teachers as positive role models;
- positive feedback and treatment of students;
- good working conditions for staff and students;
- students given responsibility;
- shared staff-student activities.

On the other hand, Smith & Tomlinson (1989) suggested four key characteristics of successful secondary schools:

- leadership and management by senior and middle managers;
- teacher involvement in decision-making;
- climate of respect between all participants;
- positive feedback to and treatment of students.

According to Reynolds (1995), research can be summarized as indicating seven major factors in creating effectiveness:

1. The nature of the leadership by the head teacher (setting the mission, involving staff).
2. Academic push or academic press: high expectations of what students can achieve, creating large amounts of learning time (including homework) and entering large numbers for public examinations.
3. Parental involvement (parents as partners in and supporters of education).
4. Pupil involvement (in learning and other aspects of the school).
5. Organisational control of pupils (reinforced by cohesion and consistency in the school together with collective ownership of practices and effective communication).
6. Organisational consistency across lessons in the same subjects, different subjects in the same years and across years.
7. Organisational constancy (limited staff turnover).

The following figure summarizes most of the aforementioned qualities that characterize the effective schools.

Figure 1. Qualities of the effective schools



Furthermore, commenting on school effectiveness Wyatt (1996) suggests:

- (a) all students can learn, under the appropriate conditions (i.e. that school's are not simply sorting mechanisms for later life)
- (b) school effectiveness depends on the equitable distribution of learning outcomes across the whole student population (not just a minority who may go on to University);
- (c) effective schools 'take responsibility for students' learning outcomes, rather than blaming students and their environment';
- (d) the more consistent the teaching and learning processes within the school are, the more effective the school is.

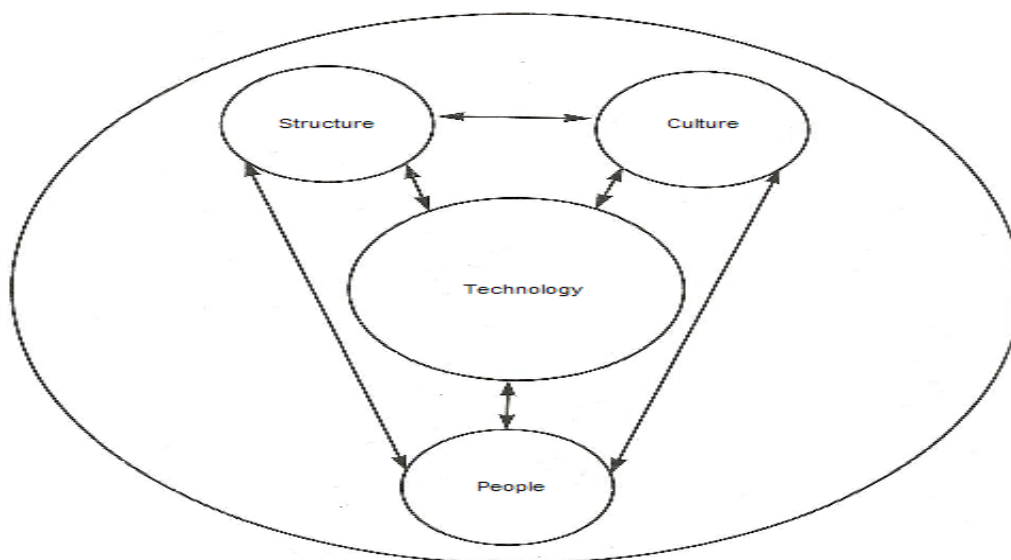
An extensive research base supports the view that leadership is the most important element of an effective school (Sergiovanni, 1984). Effective leaders articulate the types of improvements required to achieve agreed goals and expectations and develop a common language for describing good teaching and learning practices. They have a clear understanding of the change process and a deep, current and critical understanding of how people learn. Effective leaders engage their staff in professional discourse, drawing on external ideas and research to inform their thinking and actions, and encourage them to reflect on what they are trying to achieve with students and how they are doing it.

Moreover, they create organisational conditions that are conducive for teachers to continuously improve their teaching practice by providing encouragement and fostering an environment that values sharing, trust, risk-taking, experimentation, collaborative inquiry and self assessment.

At this point it should be mentioned that schools, as other organisations, consist of four independent components which are: the technology, the structure, the people and the culture (Everard & Morris 1996). All the above components that constitute the organisations interact

with each other as seen in the following figure and the success of the organisation depends on the way in which these components are balanced.

Figure 2. Components of schools as organisations



That is why the extent to which a school promotes the conditions for effective professional learning depends largely on its organisational culture – the beliefs, attitudes, values, knowledge and skills of its, students as well as leaders. Effective schools have cultures that value continuous learning and encourage all staff to reach progressively higher levels of performance. Investing in learning is the key to ensuring that schools become learning communities where teachers work together, learn from each other and share best practice on effective teaching and learning. It is only through the collective work of teachers and by creating a shared professional knowledge that sustained school improvement will be secured.

All in all, it is quite clear that school effectiveness must be seen to be much more than maximizing academic achievement. ‘Learning, the love of learning; personal development and self-esteem; life skills; problem solving and learning how to learn; the development of independent thinkers and well-rounded, confident individuals, all rank as highly or more highly in the outcomes of effective schooling as success in a narrow range of academic disciplines’ (Reynolds et al. 2000: 22).

3. Predictors of academic success

Although as already mentioned before, the issue of school effectiveness is still quite vague and unclear; there are some basic predictors that define academic success. In most cases academic success is highly connected with the students’ performance on standardised tests and their achievement as identified by state or national standardised testing. The focus lies on student achievement as identified by specific state or national standardised testing but it is

concerned only with the students' outcomes at a particular time. However, examinations of this kind only reveal what knowledge young people acquire on a particular day and maybe after a lot of hours of revision (Androutsou, 2013). The message of the educational medium is quite clear, no matter what the school prospectus may say. Academic success is about getting enough points to get onto the university course you desire (Claxton, 2008). When young people start asking the vital question 'why do I go to school?', the most common answer they get is that they need to pass the exams, go to a good college or university and inevitably this will ensure that they will have a highly paid job which in turn will make them happy.

On the contrary though, the study of a broad range of student outcomes -cognitive, social and affective- is needed to provide a satisfactory picture of school effects. As well as being important in their own right, evidence indicates that social and affective measures of student outcomes such as attendance, attitudes to school, behaviour, motivation and self-esteem can act as intermediate outcomes which affect, and can themselves be influenced by students' attainment and progress. The promotion of better cognitive outcomes should never be seen as an alternative or in some way a barrier to concern with social and affective outcomes or vice versa (Opdenakker & Van Damm, 2000; Smyth 1999). Improving a student's attainment and learning can improve self-esteem, engagement and attitudes to school and vice versa.

Apart from academic success focusing on examination performance, there is also success which is related to the development of special expertise in one area of the curriculum, such as music, art, drama or sports. In many countries around the world, there are specialized schools which are attended by talented young people who excel in a particular subject of the curriculum. In these schools where special expertise is developed, success is related to the students' achievements in the area they have selected and is measured according to their performance or the prizes they might get.

However, in the previous cases success is measured predominantly in terms of examination performance either on standardised tests or on a specified area of the curriculum. The question that rises now is whether exams should be the only criterion which will define academic success. Yet, if education is a preparation for future life, examinations do not take into account interests, understandings or capabilities that young people could develop (Claxton, 2008). According to McGaw (1992), school success means much more than academic achievement. It includes other parameters such as learning, the love of learning and especially learning how to learn. Success in education should be about personal development and self-esteem of the young people about developing independent thinkers and confident individuals. However, this involves changing our focus from the curriculum and exams to young learners. Our students will not be isolated learners, learning facts until the exams are over and then forgetting them, but instead through engagement, they will be helped to form concepts about the world which will in turn enable them to become global-self regulated learners (Otero & Sparks, 2000).

Therefore, these standard predictors that define academic success through examination procedures should be re-evaluated if the schools seek to improve the quality of the education

they provide Academic performance is one aspect of a school's performance that can be measured but obviously there are other aspects that the community identifies as desired outcomes of 'successful schools'. These outcomes have to do with the role of the schools in promoting social, emotional and physical development and well being of our youth alongside their intellectual development (Silins & Murray-Harvey, 2000). In a study, in schools from South Australia, student factors that have been associated with accepted notions of quality schooling outcomes, such as student attitude to school, their approaches to learning and their academic self-concept, were examined. According to this study, there is 'an association between school performance outcomes and positive students' attitudes to school in terms of the social/emotional experience the school provides. In this model, students' attitude to school was defined by students' perceptions of the opportunity for success in life that schools provide, general satisfaction with school, the extent of their social integration and perceived achievement' (Silins & Murray-Harvey, 2000: 8).

Conclusion

Having all these in mind one could conclude that school 'success' is not a simple, clear cut issue but it includes the participation of a number of factors. Linking whole school planning and specific classroom pedagogical approaches to improvement is likely to have a greater impact on student outcomes than strategies which focus on just the school or on just the classroom level in isolation. It must be recognized that successful school improvement cannot be externally mandated but involves careful and realistic planning and the conscious commitment and involvement of teachers and leaders in schools (Stringfield, Ross & Smith, 1996).

Therefore, we as educationalists should have as our most important priority to reduce school failure, especially today with the high rates of unemployment and a shift in the demand for skills. As for countries, the main challenge is to know what policies to implement, and how to implement them, so as to design a school system that is both fair and inclusive.

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