School Effectiveness for Whom?

Challenges to the School Effectiveness and School Improvement Movements

Roger Slee and Gaby Weiner
with Sally Tomlinson (editors)

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Chapter 1

Introduction: School Effectiveness for Whom?

Roger Slee and Gaby Weiner

Educational Failure and the Crisis of Schooling

Crisis in education? What crisis? Recent media reportage on schooling in Britain, and elsewhere, is characterized by panics over a litany of alleged failures in state schooling:

- falling standards of student achievement compared with the suggested performance of British students of past generations and against the performance of their international peers in Western Europe and Pacific-rim nations;
- the failure of urban comprehensive schools;
- teacher incompetence;
- 'out of control' student behaviour;
- inadequate teacher training in basic skills instruction in English and mathematics;
- irrelevant educational research in higher education.

Reflecting upon the 'despairing' and 'dismissive' national discussion of public schools in the United States, Mike Rose (1995) condemns the distorted reports of the failure of public education arguing that the dominance of such a discourse blinds us to the complex lives lived out in the classroom.

> It [the discourse of failure] pre-empts careful analysis of one of the nation's most significant democratic projects. And it engenders a mood of cynicism and retrenchment, preparing the public mind for extreme responses: increased layers of testing and control, denial of new resources—even the assertion that money doesn't affect a school's performance—and the curative effects of free market forces via vouchers and privatization. (Rose, 1995, p. 2)

The effective schooling research, in conjunction with its operational branch—the school improvement movement—has been adopted by policy-makers pursuant to the resolution of these alleged crises in state education (Mortimore, 1995; Barber, 1995 and 1996; Reynolds and Farrell, 1996). The academic voice of some sections of the school effectiveness research community are more tentative and considerate of the limitations of their research paradigm.

> An important conclusion that can be derived from research is that the margins for schools and classrooms are small. About 12 to 18 per cent of the variance in student outcomes can be explained by classroom and school factors…(Creemers, 1994, p. 20)

Reynolds (1992) and Creemers and Reynolds (1989) have been similarly cautious in his call for effectiveness researchers to resist superficial generalizing, and to problematize their work beyond producing endless lists of factors to be taken up as reform recipes by the school improvers. There is a problem that in different fora the strength of this plea lapses as he argues the case for 'high reliability organizations' in school and collapses effectiveness, improvement and inclusion together as a consistent set of educational goals (e.g. Reynolds, 1995; Reynolds and Ramasut, 1993). Geoff Whitty (1997) recently reminded us of Gerald Grace's well-founded, if cynical, observation that 'too often…the "bigger picture" is not entirely ignored but alluded to in…"contextual rhetoric" at the beginning of a book or paper and then forgotten' (p. 156).

As a number of the contributors to this book contend, the discourse of effective schooling and school improvement is narrow in its assessment of school effects (see Chapter 7, Lingard, Ladwig and Luke), reducing school learning to discrete assessable and comparable fragments of academic knowledge.

> But if our understanding of schooling and the conception we have of what's possible emerge primarily from these findings, then what we can imagine for public education will be terribly narrow and impoverished…If we think about education largely in relation to economic competitiveness, then we lose sight of the fact that school has to be about more than economy. If we determine success primarily in terms of test scores, then we ignore the social, moral and aesthetic dimensions of teaching and learning—and, as well, we'll miss those considerable intellectual achievements which aren't easily quantifiable. If we judge one school according to the success of another, we could well diminish the particular ways the first school serves its community. (Rose, 1995, pp. 2 and 3)

Such reductionism resonates with the neo-conservative discourse of performativity, efficiency and the highly contested notion of academic standards (see Ball, Chapter 6). In its apparent clarity and claims to common sense, that is that all schools should aim to be as effective as possible, school effectiveness is, in our view, epistemologically problematic and politically promiscuous and malleable (see Chapter 2, Hamilton; Slee, Chapter 8). The current dominance of school effectiveness research and school improvement discourses in education policy-making is a manifestation of this. The aim of this book, and here we move into new territory, is to issue a comprehensive challenge to the claims, and silences, of school effectiveness research with the aim of providing a more theoretically robust basis for understanding, evaluating and developing the work of schools and the experiences of teachers and students.

This book should not, then, be dismissed as the naiveté of the displaced and disgruntled Left ideologues. We will argue that schooling does have its troubles. However, we maintain that the analysis of the nature and location of these troublesby the school effectiveness research literature, and in turn those writing DfEE policy off the back of this research, is oversimplified, misleading and thereby

educationally and politically dangerous (notwithstanding claims of honorable intent). This book is offered as a considered interruption to the dominance of the school effectiveness juggernaught as it rides roughshod over educational policy-making and research.

A History for Failure

Mass compulsory education was originally established as a system for the allocation to and preparation of children for their eventual work and social class destination. Whatever changes that have been made over the years, in the aspect of class selection, schooling has been remarkably successful (Hatcher, 1996). In their extended research into the operational distortions and brutality of the education market place Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) reflect upon the deep historic structure of class as articulated through and reinforced by schooling in the UK and its most recent manifestations, notwithstanding the deflective liberal discourse applied to the vicissitudes of the market.

> Our contextual analysis of choice and class goes to the heart of the ideology of the market and the claims of classlessness and neutrality. Choice emerges as a major new factor in maintaining and indeed reinforcing social-class divisions and inequalities. The point is not that choice and the market have moved us away from what was a smoothly functioning egalitarian system of schooling to one that is unfair. That is crude and unrealistic. There were significant processes of differentiation and choice prior to 1988 (within and between schools). Some skillful and resourceful parents were always able to 'work the system' or buy a private education or gain other forms of advantage for their children. But post-1988, the stratagems of competitive advantage are now ideologically endorsed and practically facilitated by open enrolment, the deregulation of recruitment and parental choice. Well-resourced choosers now have free reign to guarantee and reproduce, as best they can, their existing cultural, social and economic advantages in the new complex and blurred hierarchy of schools. Class selection is revalorized by the market. (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995, p. 23)

Education in Britain and elsewhere has centrally been involved in the allocation of success and failure. Schooling has acted as the (credentialling) turnstile for higher education and the skilled and profession-based workforce. The requirements of the unskilled labour market, together with domestic family service for girls and a segregated system of special education have colluded with schools to disguise the extent of educational failure. Truancy amongst girls who were allowed to remain at home to service the home was not recognized as an educational problem (Abbott and Breckinridge, 1917). The segregation of the least intellectually able in special schools for the feeble-minded was another example of how failure was individually pathologized and not considered the responsibility of the school. Barton (1987) considers 'special educational needs' to be an institutional sleight of hand, a euphemism for the failure of schools. At the end of the twentieth century, the crisis in the unskilled youth labour market (Polk and Tait, 1992; Marginson, 1994) combined with changing familial expectations for girls (Spender, 1982; Weiner, 1995), the emergence of the

community and comprehensive school (Pring and Walford, 1997; Simon, 1997), the increased surveillance of and provision for 'special needs' in regular schools (Tomlinson, 1982; Lewis, 1993; Slee, 1995), the retention, and exclusion, patterns of the schooling of black boys (Gillborn, 1995; Sewell, 1997), and the introduction of marketization and the highly scrutinized and reported competition between schools (Ball, 1994; Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995) have each exposed the continuing failure of the nineteenth-century artifact of a system of mass compulsory education.

The response to the increased exposure of schooling's failure has been the evocation of crisis and panic—moral, academic and cultural. We suggest that the crisis is manufactured (Berliner and Biddle, 1995). Rather than attempt the transformation of a fundamentally flawed and exclusionary system of education, a distraction from the main issues is created—the collapse of many traditional areas of (male) unskilled and skilled work, bourgeois panic about losing economic and social privilege, loss of empire and the ravages of post-colonialism (cultural restorationism), and so the list goes on. The sense of crisis has been addressed and exacerbated by the further condensation or reduction of what constitutes success to a narrowing band of academic qualifications (Pring, 1997; Lawton, 1997) and a polarization of the means by which qualifications are achieved. From this we derive the 'good' and the 'bad' school, the good and bad teacher, and axiomatically those high risk students (the 'fractious and unruly' working-class and underclass, students from non-English speaking backgrounds, 'special needs' students, and so the list goes on) who must be driven out of normal educational provision to protect the school's place on the published league table.

To what extent are the school effectiveness and school improvement movements implicated in this manufactured crisis? Why does this book set out to challenge educational initiatives which appear to have broadly consensual and common-sense goals? Who could quarrel with the aims of making schools better, more effective, more efficient? Why are we so uneasy about educational strategies which appear to respond to the wishes of politicians, parents—to a nation perceived to be at risk? As Reynolds points out, surely cutting-edge schools of a cutting-edge nation need to aim for 'high reliability', so that children in different schools can reliably expect to have exactly the same experiences and all achieve the highest of standards.

As will become clear in this book, such apparent common-sense philosophies and strategies mask some fundamental flaws. Effective schooling is essentially functionalist, veering away from difficult questions about the purpose of schooling and its relationship to the future beyond the crudest forms of human capital theory. Whitty (1997) is clear in his assessment of a flawed research interest:

> Certainly the more optimistic versions of work in this genre tend to exaggerate the extent to which local agency can challenge structural inequalities. Often it is not so much the specific claims that are significant, but rather the silences…Even today, some of the school effectiveness and school improvement literature glosses over the fact that one conclusion to be drawn from a reading of the pioneering FifteenThousand Hours

> research (Rutter et al., 1979) is that, if all schools performed as well as the best schools, the stratification of achievement by social class would be even more stark than it is now. (p. 156)

Effective schools? Effective for whom? Effective for what? Who in fact gains from the school effectiveness research and school improvement industries? We maintain that while purporting to be inclusive and comprehensive, school effectiveness research is riddled with errors: it is excluding (of children with special needs, black boys, so-called clever girls), it is normative and regulatory (operating mainly within narrow sets of performance indicators), it is bureaucratic and disempowering. It focuses exclusively on the processes and internal constructs of schooling, apparently disconnected from education's social end—adulthood. School effectiveness seems to be neither interested nor very effective in preparing children for citizenship, parenthood or work (Ranson, 1997).

The readers of this book will observe thematic consistency and overlap throughout the chapters that follow. Let us précis some of these themes under the following headings.

School Effectiveness Research is Undermined by Epistemic and Methodological Reductionism

School effectiveness research bleaches context from its analytic frame. It is silent on the impact of the National Curriculum, the marketization of schooling, the press for selected entry and grant-maintained distortions of the relative performance of schools. There is a taken-for-granted set of assumptions about the purpose of schooling and what counts for the benchmarks for determining an effective education. The politics of identity and failure are irrelevant data for the school effectiveness researcher. Elliot's (1996, p. 204) conviction is that the outcome of the costly research and debate is a set of 'enduring truths' which are nothing but a set of platitudes. Nixon and his colleagues (1997) have argued that '…the "enduring truths" of school effectiveness research, have failed to recognize the impact of social and economic disadvantage upon learning', and argue against the normalizing project of school effectiveness for a localized community action research in order that schools 'reclaim their professional legitimacy and authority' (p. 122). School effectiveness research must square up to the challenge of power and method (Gitlin, 1994; Ladwig and Gore, 1994) as well as more rigorously addressing the challenges (see Brown, Chapter 4) to its claims to scientific status (Reynolds, 1995).

Political Opportunism and the Discourse of Performativity

The contributors to this book collectively form a picture of the school effectiveness and school improvement movement which is opportunistic and comfortable with a discourse of public policy which defines educational performance

according to a narrow and fragmented set of test criteria. Students' achievements in pencil and paper limited and culturally specific tests are then used as the data for comparison and the compilation of published league tables. This discourse of performativity is characterized by 'incoherence and perversity' (Ball, 1996, p. 2). Ball illustrates this point by drawing our attention to the Conservative Government's celebration of increasing pass rates at GCSE level as testimony to their commitment to 'raising standards' and simultaneously condemning the data as evidence of 'declining standards'. The political appeal and utility of school effectiveness research and the school improvement movement is in its apparent statistical sophistication and provision of a 'ready reckoner'—a checklist of benchmarks against which to measure students' and schools' performances.

In proffering lists of factors characteristic to 'effective schools', schools are pathologized as good or bad schools. Teachers are adjudicated according to their adherence to disconnected criteria and school administrators are scored in relation to their personal embodiment of those attitudes and behaviours which support the effective schools model. This is entirely consistent with the extremely costly and punitive mode of operation of the educational inspection agency. We use the term 'agency' quite deliberately as inspection franchising is increasingly sub-contracted to the lowest bidders.

Effectiveness Models Favour the Privileged and Punish the Disadvantaged

A unifying theme throughout the ensuing chapters is the general failure of school effectiveness and school improvement discourses for disadvantaged students. This stems from the previously mentioned failure within this research genre to broaden its analysis to a contextualized analysis of school effects (see Chapter 7: Lingard, Ladwig and Luke). The liberal claim that ineffective or failing schools, by adopting the characteristics of those schools deemed successful, can also tread the path to success, is naive or disingenuous. Attempts to link school effectiveness research with the discourse of educational inclusion are challenged by this book (see Slee, Chapter 8, this volume). The normalizing project of school effectiveness obstructs the serious consideration of the politics of identity and difference in schools and the affirmation of the broader educational goals of social justice and democracy (Howe, 1997; Eraser, 1997).

The Structure of the Book

This book hosts an impressive collection of chapters from serious and highly regarded academics noted for their considered approaches to educational research and debate. We resist the current temptation of a form of educational populism, verging on journalese, which dominates educational writing and policy-making and corrals the discussion of schooling within narrowly prescribed parameters

of 'raising standards' and 'school effectiveness'. Organized into three sections: 1. Setting the Debates; 2. Theorizing the Debates; and 3. Experiencing the Impacts of School Effectiveness Research and the School Improvement Movement, this book opens with a series of compelling, passionate and rational assessments of the debates surrounding school effectiveness research and the application of its findings through the school improvement movement. In Setting the Debates, David Hamilton issues a provocative and comprehensive challenge to the foundations and scope of the 'truth claims' of school effectiveness research. Joe Rea and Gaby Weiner reflect upon the debates raised by Hamilton as they bear down upon their work in an inner-London school and department of teacher education. Margaret Brown takes up the a number of methodological issues within the school effectiveness research paradigm and exposes them to critical scrutiny. Particular attention is paid to the following of superficial international comparisons.

In Section 2, Theorizing the Debates, Hugh Lauder, Ian Jamieson and Felicity Wikeley establish the conceptual confusion within the research programme, highlighting its limits and capabilities to suggest a range of models for school development. In the chapters by Stephen Ball and by Bob Lingard, Jim Ladwig and Allan Luke the reader is invited to engage with a robust analysis of context and social theory to identify the politics of school effectiveness discourses and to consider different sets of questions for educational research into school effects. Roger Slee takes issue with the school effectiveness and school improvement claims for improving the academic and social outcomes of so-called 'special educational needs students' and suggests that this normalizing research genre and its subsequent set of policy imperatives will further disadvantage students who embody the risk of undermining schools' performances in the academic league tables.

The third section of the book, Experiencing the Impacts of School Effectiveness Research and the School Improvement Movement transports the reader into the field where the effects of the school effectiveness and improvement movements are directly felt. Gerald Grace brings questions of value and principle back to questions of schools' educational and pastoral role and discusses notions of effectiveness in relation to Catholic education. Pat Mahoney and Ian Hextall draw on their extended research into the Teacher Training Agency in the UK to show how this funding agency has used dominant models of effectiveness to define and shape teacher effectiveness and school leadership in teacher training. Bob Spooner and Sally Tomlinson provide forceful local accounts of the damaging discourse of school failure and identify the paradoxical and damaging impacts of official interventions on children's educational experiences. Sheila Riddell, Sally Brown and Jill Duffield employ their research findings from Scottish schools to argue for the greater application of qualitative research methods in the evaluation of schooling and educational policy-making.

We stress that the point of this book is not to be negative. The point is to recognize the inevitability of the failure of school effectiveness research and the school improvement movement, even in its own terms of reference, and to sound

a warning. This is not a self-serving academic text to increase the stocks of the authors in higher education effectiveness benchmarks; it is a serious challenge to the dangerously narrow platform of school effectiveness research upon which education policy is being mounted.

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Part One

Setting the Debates

Chapter 2

The Idols of the Market Place

David Hamilton

> There are also idols formed by the intercourse and association of men with each other, which I call Idols of the Market-place, on account of the commerce and consort of men there. For it is by discourse that men associate; and words are imposed according to the apprehension of the vulgar. And therefore the ill and unfit choice of words wonderfully obstructs the understanding. Nor do the definitions or explanations wherewithin some things learned men are wont to guard and defend themselves, by any means set the matter right. But words plainly force and overrule the understanding, and throw all into confusion, and lead men away into numberless empty controversies and idle fancies. (Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum,* 1620, aphorism 43)

The school effectiveness rationale, promulgated in the 1990s, is unwarranted. Its claims to be authoritative do not succeed; its prescriptions cannot be justified by appeals to the canons of science; it embraces an unconvincing rhetoric redolent of Bacon's idols of the market place. This chapter focuses upon these weaknesses. It constitutes a response to two aspects of the school effectiveness rationale. The first part—Peddling Feel-good Fictions (see also Hamilton, 1996)—addresses the logic of an argument which, in its turn, generates policy prescriptions cast in the form of 'key characteristics of effective schools'. And the second part of this chapter—Fordism by Fiat—examines the consequences of such a rationale, in this case focusing on the distributive assumption that effective schools are necessarily effective for all pupils.

Peddling Feel-good Fictions

Effective schooling has become an global industry. Its activities embrace four processes: research, development, marketing and sales. Research entails the construction of new prototypes; development entails the commodification of these prototypes; marketing entails the promotion of these commodities; and sales entails efforts to ensure that market returns exceed financial investment. The school effectiveness industry, therefore, stands at the intersection of educational research and social engineering.

There is another perspective on school effectiveness research. Its efforts cloak school practices in a progressive, social-darwinist, eugenic rationale. It is progressive because it seeks more efficient and effective ways of steering social progress. It is social-darwinist because it accepts survival of the fittest. And it is eugenic because it privileges the desirable and seeks to eliminate the negative.

But something else lurks beneath this liberal veneer. School effectiveness research underwrites, I suggest, a pathological view of public education in the late twentieth century. There is, it appears, a plague on all our houses. Teachers have been infected; schools have been contaminated; and classroom practices have become degenerative and dysfunctional. In short, schools have become sick institutions. They are a threat to the health of the economic order. Their decline must be countered with potent remedies. Emergency and invasive treatments are targeted. Schools need shock therapy administered by outside agencies. Terminal cases merit organ transplants (viz. new heads or governing bodies). And, above all, every school requires targeted inset therapy. Senior management teams deserve booster steroids to strengthen their macho leadership, while their remaining staff require regular implants of appraisal-administered HRT (Human Resource Technology) to attenuate their curriculum and classroom excesses.

From this last perspective, then, school effectiveness research hankers for prototypes—in the form of tablets, magic bullets or smart missiles—that are the high-tech analogues of the lobotomies and hysterectomies of the nineteenth century. It is no accident that David Reynolds (University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne), who co-authored a 'mission statement' on school effectiveness and school improvement in 1990, was moved five years later to caution against quackery: 'we need to avoid peddling simplistic school effectiveness snake oil as a cure-all' (*Times Educational Supplement,* 16th June, 1995, p. 19). For these reasons, school effectiveness research is technically and morally problematic. Its research findings and associated prescriptions cannot be taken on trust. They are no more than a cluster of assumptions, claims and propositions. They are arguments to be scrutinized, not prescriptions to be swallowed.

Key Characteristics of Effective Schools (Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore, 1995) illustrates these problems. It is a 'review of school effectiveness research', commissioned in 1994 by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). The reviewers, based at the International School Effectiveness and Improvement Centre of the London University Institute of Education, saw their task as twofold. First, to summarize 'current knowledge' about school effectiveness; and secondly, to respond to OFSTED's request for 'an analysis of the key determinants of school effectiveness in secondary and primary schools' (p. 1). This task redefinition is noteworthy. The extension of OFSTED's remit—the attention to 'current knowledge' as well as 'key determinants'—suggests that the reviewers were reluctant to focus unilaterally on causality. There was, they imply, a 'need for caution' in interpreting 'findings concerning key determinants' (p. 1).

The redefinition also suggests that the sponsors and researchers did not share the same view of causality. OFSTED appears to espouse a straightforward, linear model of causality. In linear systems, a straightforward cause leads to a straightforward effect. In non-linear systems the outcome is so sensitive to initial conditions that a minuscule change in the situation at the beginning of the process may result in a large difference at the end. OFSTED assumes that, in cases of straightforward causality, outcomes can be linked directly and unambiguously to inputs. OFSTED believes, in effect, that it is possible to predict the final resting place of a set of billiard balls on the basis of the prior cue stroke. The Institute of