

New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 27

A comprehensive framework for effective school improvement

Context of the Research

Effective school improvement is high on the agenda of most countries' educational policies. However, theory and research associated with this have tended to come from the paradigms of "school effectiveness" and "school improvement" which have grown apart over the years in terms of their methodology and focus.

School effectiveness is strongly focusing on student outcomes and the characteristics of schools and classrooms that are associated with these outcomes without automatically looking at the processes that are needed to bring changes. School improvement is mainly concerned about changing the quality of teachers and schools without automatically looking at the consequences for student outcomes. In short, school effectiveness is trying to find out *what* is to be changed in schools in order to become more effective while school improvement is trying to find out *how* schools can change in order to improve.

This project has aimed to create stronger links between these two ways of thinking by the creation of a "comprehensive framework" for effective school improvement that helps to explain why improvement efforts succeed or fail and which factors promote or hinder effective school improvement.

The project conducted an extensive analysis of about 30 school improvement projects in eight countries (The Netherlands, Finland, United Kingdom, Belgium-French Community, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal).

Key Conclusions

The key outcome was the Effective School Improvement (ESI) framework based on the theoretical and practical analysis of school improvement projects. The school is put at the centre of this framework that can be used by: -

- a) Practitioners - for designing, planning and implementation of school improvement.
- b) Researchers - for further research in the field of effective school improvement.

- c) Policy makers - as it helps to clarify which factors must be taken into consideration in the planning of improvement processes in schools. However they must be aware that the framework can never be used as a recipe for effective school improvement or as a ready-made toolbox for the implementation of improvement in schools.

Helped by this framework the following conclusions were reached: -

1. Schools and school improvements must always be considered within the educational context of a country.
2. Even if an improving school is free to decide about their improvement outcomes they will always have to be in line with the wider educational country context which exert influence through: -
 - Pressure to improve
 - Resources for improvement
 - Educational goals
3. Effective school improvement requires whole school processes aiming to enhance the quality of instruction in classrooms. Individual teachers can never promote lasting changes in the school. The school organisation may add or subtract value to that of its individual members.
4. Schools with little team collaboration might expect to find a large variation in the performance of pupils. However, in a well-led and managed school there is likely to be less variation and greater consistency across the school. This results in the "school effect" - adding value to that of individual teachers.
5. However, in most countries studied, the school, as an organisation does not currently play a major role in effective school improvement.
6. Most current practice seems to target teachers as important for influencing effective school improvements. However: -
 - a) Teachers tend to work independently, perhaps without a school plan of common goals and methods.
 - b) Inspectors assess only teachers not the schools.
 - c) Teachers are placed centrally at schools, which might reduce their involvement in school improvement.
 - d) The principal's main function is administration rather than fostering educational leadership and may be elected for a short time period thus reducing their central role in managing school reform.

7. However, in some countries there is evidence to point to the importance of the school as an organisation: -
 - a) Use is made of effective school knowledge - by making schools accountable for inspection results that are published in newspapers and the Internet.
 - b) The development of schools as “learning organisations” is fostered by, example, peer coaching, team staff development and schools receiving earmarked funds for staff development.
8. Schools do need some form of external pressure from the educational context to start improving. Four types of pressure were distinguished: -
 - a) *Market mechanisms* - competition between schools - leading to consumers (parents) being better informed about the schools’ quality. However, it can result in parents’ preference for traditional schools, the creation of white and black schools and inequality between schools.
 - b) *External evaluation and accountability* - generally concerns the measurement of student outcomes with a national validated test. When the results are published schools are held accountable and are under pressure to positively change student outcomes. However, this can lead to negative consequences like helping students with the tests. If sanctions are high, schools can be closed down. Sometimes evaluations may not be fair.
 - c) *External agents* - such as inspectors, policy makers, educational consultants and researchers may push schools to improve by giving suggestions of what and how to improve.
 - d) *Participation of society in education and societal changes* - society influences schools in many ways and demands school improvement that is often mediated by government policies responding to influences like learning to learn how to study and the use of information technology. Sometimes these changes are receiving wide support, but there is a limit to the amount of changes schools are willing to perform.
9. Material and non-material forms of support are essential for effective school improvement. Three forms of support are distinguished: -
 - a) *Granting autonomy to schools* - this could be in the form of educational goals, educational means, organisation (personnel, management, administration) and finances. For effective school improvement some autonomy is necessary because improvements, which do not tailor to school’s needs, are likely to fail. The success of autonomy depends to a large extent on the willingness and capacity of the school team to continuously improve in the direction of a more effective school. Some forms of external control seem to be a requirement to stimulate schools to use their autonomy in a ‘good’ way.

b) *Financial resources and working conditions* - with sufficient financial resources and time, improvement will succeed more easily. Large classes, a large amount of teaching hours and instability of education policies do not contribute to the motivation to improve.

c) *Local support* - from parents, district officials, school administrations, and school boards.

Key Recommendations

The recommendations were made: -

1. Efforts should be made to reduce the negative aspects of market mechanisms.
2. External evaluations should take place at regular periods. The results should be presented in a fair way in order to show what value has been added since the last evaluation. The information collected should be primarily aimed at helping school improvement.
3. High quality external agents should be used as facilitators of effective school improvement.
4. Care needs to be taken not to overload schools with innovations.

Further Information

Full title of the project - "Capacity for Change and Adaptation of Schools in the Case of Effective School Improvement" with the final report "A Framework for Effective School Improvement" completed on 6 July 2001

[Full report](#), [Abstract](#), [Summary](#), [Partner details](#)

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