

SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS RESEARCH

School effectiveness research (SER) investigates the extent to which schools fulfil their aims efficiently. It does not look at processes or address the issue of whether or not those aims are worthwhile. SER accepts that differences between student outcomes are largely determined by socio-economic status and 'natural' factors, but maintains that schools can and do make a significant difference. It attempts to explain why and to what extent those differences vary from school to school and between countries.

SER is a quantitative, organisation-focused approach that began in earnest in 1979 - its *annus mirabilis* - though earlier research by Coleman *et al.* (1966) and Jencks (1972) could be included. In that year, Edmonds (1979) and Brookover *et al.* (1979) in the USA, and Rutter *et al.* (1979) in the UK, produced seminal studies which found that schools have a 'small but significant' effect on student attainment. Several school-level factors were found to impact and these included: the balance of able and less-able students attending the school; the presence or absence of reward systems; the physical environment; the opportunity for students to take responsibility; and having strong leadership with democratic decision-making. Among the factors found *not* to be correlated with effectiveness were class size and school size.

In the 1980s, Reynolds, Creemers, Scheerens and others added to the list of school factors affecting outcomes: a high proportion of students in positions of authority; low levels of institutional control; high academic expectations; a low ratio of pupils to teachers; a safe and orderly school climate; and evaluating student progress early and often (Teddle & Reynolds, 2000). Later, with the advent of more sophisticated

approaches in multi-level and structural equation modelling, and paying greater attention to school improvement experience, still more SER emerged: in the UK, from Mortimore *et al.*, (1988); in the USA, from Levine and Lezotte (1990) and Teddlie and Stringfield (1993). Mortimore *et al.* found that effective schools have purposeful leadership, consistent teaching and structured lessons, are intellectually challenging places where teaching is focused, have good communications between students and teachers, and have an active parent body. The American studies found additionally that effective schools spend more time on task, are more encouraging of independent practice, have a lower number of interruptions, have firm discipline and exude a friendly atmosphere. Yet there also emerged around this time indications from outside the English-speaking world that some SER findings were culture-specific and context-dependent; for example, in some countries, leadership was found to have little or no effect on student outcomes (van de Grift, 1990).

SER seeks to measure a school's output, correct for input and circumstance ('context'), and assign a scalar to the value the school adds to the learning experience of its students. Its approach can be criticised on a number of counts. Firstly, schools are complicated palimpsests and the idea that they are homogeneous entities, while convenient for policy-makers, does not ring true with parents and practitioners. Rarely do children come home from lessons and talk about the organisation that is their school; *their* paradigm is of the classroom and the curriculum as they interact with it. Secondly, because SER focuses on measurables it tends to ignore 'difficult-to-measure' but important factors like the impact of competitor schools on each other, teacher satisfaction and societal culture, the last of which makes international comparisons like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

difficult to make and sometimes nonsensical. Thirdly, the act of measurement itself affects what is being measured. Schools learn to limit their engagement to those activities that produce the most visible ‘public’ effects. And lastly, while SER is good at listing and ranking influencing factors - though some are so obvious as to seem *de trop* - it is not so good at understanding educative *processes*, without which practical efforts at improvement become futile. Nor does it provide an accurate account of the waxing and waning of everyday life in schools; only a snapshot of things as they were at the moment of measurement.

Currently, there are concerted efforts being made within SER to utilise more widely new approaches and to engage fully with (the more rigorous end of) school improvement research, even if the two fields are in some ways critiques of each other (Fidler, 2001).

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ANTHONY KELLY