Social class and the effective school paradigm

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The effective school paradigm has dominated educational and political thinking concerning the nature of schools for the last two decades. This paradigm asserts that it is the characteristics of schools that are the important factors that influence academic achievement. It is a perspective that is the opposite of the view that was widely held in the 1960s and early 1970s; which placed a much greater emphasis on the social context. Explores weaknesses in the effective school paradigm, considers how adequately the effective school paradigm explains recent developments such as the events at Hackney Downs in the London Borough of Hackney, and stimulates a debate on how the social environment affects what happens inside schools.

To attempt to comprehend schools through the “effective school” paradigm is rather like using Milne’s description of the Hundred Acre Wood to understand the character of a real wood. At first it may seem an adequate description, but once the nature of a real wood is considered it becomes clear that Milne’s description is just a very good idealized model. A principal problem with the effective school paradigm is that it does not adequately take into account a systems perspective of how organizations are influenced by external social factors. In part because the reader is given a Weberian archetype in which the organization is considered as a cloistered entity.

In recent years the idea of the effective school has had a high profile in the thinking of government and has dominated the literature on school improvement. It has been the driving force behind much of the government legislation since 1979. The governance section of bookshops are full of books designed for management courses in education, listing obligatory modules on the effective school alongside those on leadership and motivation for aspiring school managers. Recipe lists of characteristics are outlined, normally (but not always) linked to collaborative management models which if strived for will deliver the optimum learning environment.

The term effective school has now entered common usage in the debate on education with the dominant agreed definition of the term being that used by government and opposition ministers, and inspectors. However, many teachers are increasingly concerned that inspection teams fail to appreciate that their schools are effective within the situation that they function, and that they have a legitimate contribution to make as to what constitutes an effective school.

We are of the view that it may be useful to consider briefly the origins of the effective school movement. It is not our aim to review the effective school literature as a number of excellent reviews and analyses of this have been published (Bossert, 1988; Brophy and Good, 1986; Purkey and Smith, 1987). However, we feel nonetheless that a consideration of the principal ideas in the literature may help to explain the discrepancy between the assessors and the assessed as to what constitutes an effective school. It is our belief that a wider view of what constitutes an effective school is required if schools in different social economic areas are to be compared adequately and equitably.

The effective school movement was born out of a reaction to the postwar writings of sociologists such as Jenck (1972), who published research that indicated schools were neglecting the social context in which they operated to the detriment of many pupils. In general the underlying ideology of the effective school literature such as Rutter et al. (1979) is to argue that schools do make a difference, and that the variables of race, social class and home environment have only a limited impact on school achievement.

The effective school literature represented a significant change in the methodology in how schools were studied with a move away from large scale statistical reports such as Newsom (1963) to case studies based on successful schools. The advantage of case studies is that they can be used to illustrate broad statistical patterns, e.g., a poverty survey with descriptions of typical one parent families.

However, there are real concerns about data produced by case studies. The samples tend to be small and therefore make generalizations difficult, and the techniques involved tend to be idiosyncratic and of low reliability. The emphasis on the use of case studies in the effective school literature inevitably results in a limited analysis of the situation being studied. Simply because case studies do not take into account that because two observed phenomena occur at the same time does not allow you to infer what relationship, casual or otherwise, there might exist between them.

The effective school literature has a long history originating in attempts in the USA to analyse the success of Japanese industry, the most classic example is Peters and Waterman’s (1961) In Search of Excellence, which set the style for later authors to follow. However, an essential weakness of such books is that they analyse the culture of successful companies and ignore the cultural and historical conditions which have influenced these companies.
This is part of the reason why US companies in the 1960s and 1970s continued to underperform in comparison with their Japanese counterparts. This literature consistently ignored the fact that the US military, which had been authorized with the task of re-establishing Japanese manufacturing industry, made great use of the ethos found in feudal Japanese society in order to motivate the workforce. Perhaps more importantly, the literature fails to consider the enormous financial advantages given to Japanese by it receiving “favored nation status” from the end of the war to 1966 by the US Senate.

The point is simple, the culture and history of a country shape organizations. In Britain an analysis of successful organizations would need to take into account the conflict between different social groups which has been a defining characteristic of British society since the industrial revolution. The origin of state education in Britain, the Foster Education Act 1870, was a response to class conflict, and middle-class fears of an expanding industrial urban working class. The Education Reform Act 1988 has reintroduced many of the key precepts of the 1870 legislation.

A centralized curriculum is assessed through the use of standardized attainment tests, and rigorous assessment of schools and teachers by an inspectorate. It is this historical, social and legal aspect of schools that provides the context for an analysis of whether schools are successful or not. To analyse schools as organizations without regard to the issue of social class, and viewing government legislation to be “class blind” can only result in an inadequate analysis. In the 1960s there was a wealth of data produced by sociologists which indicated how the position of different social groups influenced children’s educational chances. As a result of Douglas (1964) and his contemporaries, policies such as “education priority areas” were introduced to counter the negative effects of social evils such as poor housing and unemployment.

However, a striking characteristic of the effective school paradigm and the debate on education in the 1990s is how little consideration is given to the influence of social class on children’s performance at school. The Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) stated that Hackney Downs in the London Borough of Hackney was a failing school and should be closed. It was a decision which was justified in terms of the school’s apparently failing examination results and poor discipline. At no time was there any mention of supporting a school which is in an area defined by the European Economic Community as being in the poorest area in Europe. Hackney Downs’ achievements and failures were never discussed in relation to the social context in which the staff and pupils had to work and learn.

Since the 1980s the debate on the effective school has been influenced by political agendas and a flood of legislation, with the aim of getting schools to view excellence within the context of ideas taken from commentators on the culture of organizations such as Charles Handy (1993). This approach inevitably supports a standardized approach in pedagogy, with children viewed as uniform products to be measured by standardized attainment tests, with little regard for the influence of social factors on schools.

We recently surveyed schools in one London local education authority where in some schools over 60 per cent of the pupils do not speak English as their first language, and over 80 per cent of pupils were receiving free school meals. An emphasis on understanding and assessing schools using concepts derived from the culture of organizations simply does not address the issues with which teachers working in these schools have to cope.

The effective school literature’s reliance on this cultural paradigm has resulted in the assumption that schools can be judged in terms of output, with children viewed as “widgets” to be examined by attainment tests. However, children’s achievement is not reducible to test scores. It is hard to reconcile a developmental view of children’s education with OfSTED’s inspection procedures that present the curriculum as facts to be absorbed, as opposed to knowledge to be mastered.

This has resulted in an emphasis on the use of traditional standardized attainment tests, and calls for “traditional” teaching methods. In our view, the result will be that failures in the school setting are likely to become more salient. In this context performance goals will probably become highlighted, as was the case with the Eleven Plus examination. There are essentially two problems with performance goals; first they do not take into account the individual difficulties that many children face; and second, they do not take into account the social difficulties with which many schools, such as the late Hackney Downs, have to contend.

The effective school literature makes an assumption about children’s cognitive development, which is that it is essentially fixed; this is reminiscent of the crude use of intelligence tests in justifying differential education in the 1944 Education Act. At present it is not possible to find in the effective school literature critiques of standardized attainment tests from those who have completed...
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Research in the area of “learned helplessness” or attribution theory. The writings in the effective school literature are at the macroscopic level, the issues that concern psychologists in organizations rarely overlap, and when they do are not adequately explored. The evidence from recent research at the University of Cambridge into attribution theory (Doyle, 1995) has raised doubts about the validity and accuracy of standardized attainment tests used in schools; and indicates that performance is affected by social determinants.

The findings from my research support the sociological research of Douglas (1964) and his contemporaries which indicates that children's progress is heavily influenced by factors outside the school. Yet influential industrialists such as Everard and Morris (1994) and Handy (1991) writing on the management of schools are not able to provide meaningful solutions to the everyday problems that inner city teachers have to contend with; that was highlighted by the sociological studies of the 1960s and early 1970s.

In Britain poverty continues to exist. Many parents and children live in hardship and, in addition, many have the extra difficulty of living in areas of social deprivation. Teachers and schools can play an important role in improving the life chances of children.

While there are many metaphors that can be used to describe an organization the effective schools literature generally uses the model found in the classical management literature; which is based on Goffman’s (1961) model of an organization as a “total institution” from his examination of asylums. It is certainly questionable if Goffman’s model is applicable to many of the commercial concerns which adopted it; however, it is certainly not appropriate to schools.

There are three important features of schools that are not shared with many other organizations, especially industrial and business organizations. Schools are of major importance to the national wellbeing of the country, equal to the role of the National Health Service and the Ministry of Defence. As such schools will always face a degree of political interest, they will be subject to pressure and legislation that is not comparable in industry or business.

Second, industry and business have the maximization of profits as one of their key goals. This is often pursued regardless of the effects on employees, and in many cases with disregard for the consequences on the wider environment. This moral bankruptcy is a defining difference from schools with their responsibility for young children and adolescents.

Finally, the relationship between a school and its environment, and especially the interpersonal relationships within a school, are very different from commercial enterprises. While companies need to take into consideration the availability of a skilled workforce, road and rail networks, and access to their raw materials, these are clearly not the same types of concerns which confront schools. A primary school can not decide to change its targeted market and become a secondary school, or change its product.

In addition, research that we conducted in London (Doyle and Wells, 1996), has indicated that the introduction of commercial structures into schools has had a very negative effect on the interpersonal relationships between teachers. Therefore, caution is required when industrialists and business consultants write on matters concerning education, and especially with a paradigm that suggests using commercial organizational structures in schools.

Peters and Waterman in their search for excellence produced a powerful study based on case studies to identify successful organizations, which set the style for later authors to follow. While case studies have a place in educational research, a paradigm based on this approach, recommending recipes for schools to become successful without regard for the psychological and sociological issues that concern the learning environment, must be suspect.

Both Peters and Waterman have published many books over the years (for example see Peters, 1985, 1988; Waterman, 1988). Yet many of the firms they identified as excellent have not survived, and both writers have regularly changed their arguments as to why organizations are successful. For example, corporate culture was the key to success, now both see it as a positive threat to innovation. Writers in this area have found publishers eager to provide for the mushroom growth in management courses. Hence, they tend to be rash in their recommendations, which is reflected in the almost seasonal change on how Handy and others view organizations.

It is a fact of life in Britain that poverty continues to exist. Many parents and children live in hardship and, in addition, many have the extra difficulty of living in areas of social deprivation. Teachers and schools can play an important role in improving the life chances of children. However, children in working class families will not be helped if we continue to use the effective school paradigm.
which plays down the significance of social class in education.

If schools, teachers and pupils are to be judged equitably we need to use a different paradigm; one that has some analysis of government intervention into the economy and welfare system, which takes into consideration how the government prioritizes the use of market principles as an agent of social change, instead of improving educational excellence. It is surely rather superficial to consider that schools will be improved by a paradigm which failed manufacturing industry, the area for which it was originally designed.

Since 1979 it seems to these writers that the government and the education system have failed to respond to the biggest challenge of all: the inequality of the modern materialistic society, with, among other things, its social class “melancholy mad elephant” (Dickens, 1854) threatening to wreck urban society. We have deliberately quoted from Dickens for his Hard Times (For These Times was the sub-tile) seems to us a singularly apposite commentary on our own. He feared uniformity, and those impersonal and statistical measures which pass for education, and so should we. He feared above all the consequences for society if it ignored class inequality, and so should we.

The models and language of economic expediency now permeate the education system; since 1979 we have let today’s paper money prescribe the standards of tomorrow’s children. An education system which attempts to confront the inequalities of social class is not one that can be validated economically. Yet it is essential if we are to meet the social challenges we now face.

References
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