

Making schools more successful for more students more of the time

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The key findings of 30 years of worldwide School Effectiveness Research (SER) are examined in a new report funded by CfBT Education Trust.

The author, Professor Pam Sammons, from The University of Nottingham, presented the findings at a launch event at the New Connaught Rooms in London on 10th December, 2007.

The report, entitled School Effectiveness and Equity: Making Connections considers international research into the characteristics of effective schools and provides a framework for practitioners and policy-makers whose aim is to create more successful schools.

Pam Sammons, Professor of Education in the Teacher and Leadership Research Centre, has for many years been one of the leading figures in the movement to research the workings of schools of different types, including those that 'over-achieve'. The highly effective schools are ones 'in which students progress further than might be expected from consideration of its intake'.

The CfBT report reminds us that before this body of research began, people did not realise how powerful the impact could be of more effective schools and there was a tendency to explain student results largely in terms of social class. School Effectiveness Research has shown that the kind of school a child goes to can matter a great deal in terms of educational outcomes and life chances. The report highlights the

importance of strong links between understanding school effectiveness and achieving greater equity and social justice through education. This is particularly relevant with regard to promoting wider policies of social inclusion and reducing the achievement gap.

In the CfBT Report Professor Sammons identifies the key aspects of school life that make maximum difference, these include: leadership that focuses on educational quality and getting the right staff: consistent approaches to teaching: assessment for learning: and high levels of parental engagement.

These approaches appear to be key to success across international boundaries and regardless of the level of deprivation of the communities served by schools. Pam Sammons also emphasises the importance of the school culture. Schools that achieve against the odds are often characterised by a 'mindset' that includes a fundamental optimism and a problem-solving group attitude on the part of the staff. The report goes on to describe how the research has emphasized the need to make sense of effectiveness at the level of the classroom and the individual teacher.

The CfBT report teases out some of the practical implications of the research for school improvement. Effective school improvement programmes tend to:

- focus closely on changes at the classroom level
- adopt explicit, shared approaches to teaching strategies
- collect systematic evaluative evidence
- aim for cultural as well as structural changes.

Professor Sammons recognises that some aspects of SER are controversial. She explains that this, in part, is linked to disagreement about the purposes and therefore the outcomes of schooling. Professor Sammons argues that there is no necessary tension between 'academic' or

cognitive progress, and social and emotional development. In her conclusion she advocates schools that both maintain an emphasis on fostering students' progress, while promoting social and emotional development, recognising that these outcomes can be complementary.

SER may not offer a universal panacea but this research review suggests it can inform, empower and challenge educators to make schools more successful for more students more of the time.

Source: University of Nottingham

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