How
Very Effective
Primary Schools
Work

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Series editor's preface

I am delighted to welcome this book by Chris James and his collaborators to this series as it offers a landmark in several ways. Unlike many books on school improvement/school effectiveness it is focused on primary schools, and in this case on primary schools in Wales, a country that has not received sufficient attention for its innovatory work in education, although the concern of its peoples for education has been legendary. One consequence of this location that emerges in the stories of the success of these schools is the creative and positive relationships they had with their local authorities in sustaining their development of inclusive schooling.

For those readers who want it, James and his colleagues adumbrate an overview of the concepts and literature on school effectiveness, focusing on its systems perspectives and noting its inability to explain the interactions of individual people with organisations except in a crude and simplistic way. To address this important gap in knowledge about why people behave in the way they actually do in organisations, the authors develop a discussion of systems psychodynamic theory. This allows them to conceptualise and explain the complexities of the relationships between people and organisational systems (or powerful groups of people) in such ways that the contradictions and discontinuities that emerge in these are seen as legitimate and understandable from the perspective of the individual, and not merely evidence of obtuse obstructionism or of ineffective leadership. As Ball (1987) in an earlier work suggested, conflict in organisations is normal, not pathological. It is how that conflict is used that is important, whether for constructive development through creative dialogue or for confrontation and retrenchment. Later in the book James and his co-authors argue that focusing on the former is one of the key elements to understanding why some schools may be very effective. From their conceptual framework they draw out the main parameters through which they intend to explore the schools in their study – all of them chosen because there was strong circumstantial evidence that they were successful schools that served areas and communities that were disadvantaged socially and economically.

Unlike many studies on school improvement this work focuses on schools serving socially challenged and economically disadvantaged communities that appear to have made a difference to the quality of learning of the students that attend them. The nature of these communities is clearly described in one of the early chapters of this book so that readers understand the contexts in which the research was carried out. Yet the people from those communities are closely drawn in to supporting the work of the schools in helping children develop their learning, contradicting the usual view that people from disadvantaged communities tend to be distant from the schools their children attend. The explanation offered by the authors of this book for this is the effort put in by headteachers and other staff to encouraging and helping parents to become part of the school communities. Such success fits with work by other authors such as Vincent (2000) on the importance and means of involving people from the communities in which schools are nested to support the development of students' learning.

At the core of these successful schools, James and his colleagues argue, is effective leadership. This type of leadership focuses on particular values of inclusion and high expectations of achievement, that helps to construct a creative and inclusive culture supporting, passionately, norms and beliefs of success and achievement in learning of as good a quality as possible by everybody. In these learning communities staff encouraged students to be active co-constructors of the schools by using a variety of formal and informal channels to make their voices heard constructively. The mindsets of the people in these schools were said to be empowered, pro-active and optimistic in tackling the problems they faced to improve teaching and learning. This culture is described as the central characteristic of these schools and explicitly encompasses the importance of continuing professional development by all staff. Supporting this leadership and sharing in it, the authors found committed teachers and other staff with high expectations of themselves and strong positive interpersonal relationships who had often been carefully selected on appointment. They worked in an information-rich environment that allowed them to monitor their and their students' progress and offer formative feedback on it.

If you are a reader busy in the everyday press of education, with little time to enjoy the full detail of the book, then at least read Chapter 12 which provides a very useful summary of this important and illuminating piece of research. But it is a book that repays closer reading when you have the time, not least because the way in which the authors have conducted their research offers a blueprint for ways in which a school could evaluate its own practice and consider why it might not yet be very effective but might achieve that state in due course.

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Introduction

INTRODUCTION

It was not until the late 1970s that the idea that some schools may be more effective than others in achieving a higher level of educational outcomes began to be accepted. Since that time, the characterisation of effective schools has been the focus of much research endeavour. In fact, there has been so much research into effective schools that it could be argued that that we know all we need to know about them and that what we should do now is focus on how we improve those that are ineffective. There is, however, an equally strong, if not stronger, case for a different view.

Firstly, we may in fact not know all there is to know about what makes schools effective and we may not have a way of describing successful practice and explaining why it works. There may still be something missing that remains to be captured in the ways we look at effective schools and attempt to understand what they do. Our knowledge of them is thus incomplete. We may not have a way of describing what those schools do – a form of knowledge – that encapsulates their practice. So, although we think our descriptions are accurate, they do not actually capture the essence of successful practice. Finally, we may not have a fully developed way of explaining, understanding and theorising the good practice we observe. As a result, although we can describe 'good practice', we may not be making the correct interpretation of it and explaining why it works.

Secondly, as society continually changes, so do schools and so do society's requirements of schools. As a consequence, a set of 'effective school characteristics' that might have been adequate in the past may not be so now and may not be so in the future. Such a view argues for a constant exploration of what *currently* works and why. As schools reform and reconfigure, we need to try to continually understand what is going on in them. We also need to attempt to explain why current successful practice works and, equally, why current unsuccessful practice does not.

Thirdly, there is a growing recognition that context is a very significant but very varied influence on the effectiveness of schools. It is becoming increasingly apparent that schools need to work in particular ways according to the complex and varied nature of their local and national settings. What is needed therefore is more study of the ways in which schools work well in particular settings to find out the reasons for their particular success.

There are thus three reasons why we undertook the research we report in this book. Firstly, we wanted to discover more about schools where pupil attainment is high. In particular, we wanted to find out about schools where levels of attainment and disadvantage are both high, which is a relatively unusual occurrence given the effect that disadvantage can have on pupil attainment. Secondly, we wanted to understand why some schools are currently successful. Understandings of schools generally, the ways they are viewed and the potential to explain their workings are all developing and changing which gives a new opportunity to look afresh at why some schools are effective. Thirdly, we wanted to begin to clarify why some schools work well in specific settings. Since schools work in very different contexts, the more we can understand about how schools respond to their contexts the better, especially if the response is successful.

THE ISSUE WE ADDRESSED

The research we report here addresses an important issue which we outline fully in Chapter 4. In essence, it is as follows.

In Wales, as in many countries, the educational attainment of primary school pupils (aged 3–11) has improved over the last ten years or so. The problem is that the gap between the attainments of pupils in schools where pupil attainment overall is high and those in schools where overall it is low has not narrowed significantly. In effect, educational attainment in all schools has improved but the attainments of pupils in 'low attainment schools' have not substantially caught up with those in 'high attainment schools'.

In Wales, again, as elsewhere, socio-economic disadvantage can have a significant influence on pupil attainment. Generally, high levels of disadvantage correlate with low levels of attainment; the higher the level of disadvantage, the lower the level of attainment.

Despite the overall correlation between pupil attainment and socio-economic disadvantage, there are primary schools in Wales where the level of pupil attainment is high even though the pupils experience high levels of disadvantage. These schools appear to have overcome a negative influence on attainment – socio-economic disadvantage. They must be very effective in the way they work. We studied some of these very effective schools to find out what they do, how they do it and why it works.

OUR INTENTION IN WRITING THIS BOOK

Our intention in writing this book is to report the outcomes of our research to as wide an audience as possible. We envisage the readers of the book will be those who are interested in finding out what works in the schools we studied and why it works. We hope that reporting our findings in this way will help those who work in and with primary schools in all settings, including disadvantaged settings, to improve their schools. We also want to interpret the findings of the research in relation to various theoretical frameworks in order to make sense of what works and to understand why 'what works' works. This kind of sense-making and interpretation will inform theoretical understandings of why some schools in disadvantaged settings are successful.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book has a 'theory–research–interpretation' structure. The early chapters of the book describe some of what is already known about effective schools. They also outline a theoretical perspective known as 'system psychodynamics' or 'institutional transformation' as we also call it, which gives a way of interpreting and theorising the main findings. The middle section of the book explains how we went about the research and describes the outcomes. From our analysis of the data, we identified seven important characteristics. We call the main one of these *the central characteristic* and the others *key characteristics*. All the key characteristics contributed to and sustained the central characteristic. There are seven chapters in the middle part of the book, each of which describes a characteristic. The later chapters examine the findings in relation to what is known about effective schools and interpret the findings in relation to the system psychodynamic concepts and ideas. The book ends with some reflective thoughts and comments. Thus the content of the various chapters following this introduction is as follows.

Chapter 2 summarises key aspects of the literature on the characteristics of effective schools. Our intention in this chapter is to provide a way of comparing practice in the schools we studied with what is already known about effective and successful schools. In Chapter 3, we describe the important underpinnings of system psychodynamics, which is the theoretical framework which we use to interpret the findings and to explain why the schools were successful.

In Chapter 4, we describe the context of the research, explore the key issue we addressed and explain how we undertook the research so that readers can fully understand the research process and the setting. Chapter 5 describes the central characteristic and the way it is represented in the schools. This central characteristic is a productive, strong and highly inclusive culture that is focused on ensuring effective and enriched teaching for learning for all pupils and improving and enriching further

teaching for learning for all pupils. Chapter 6 discusses leadership in the schools. In particular, we focus on the two key dimensions of the work of the headteacher. The first is the headteacher's role in setting, driving and reinforcing the school culture. The second dimension is developing leadership capability in others in order to create leadership density and depth in the school. This chapter also looks at the contribution of the governing body to the work of the schools.

In all the schools, there was a clearly discernable way of thinking, an attitude of mind and an overall approach which we have termed 'the mindset'. We describe the various components of this mindset in Chapter 7. In Chapter 8, which is entitled 'The teaching team', we describe the way in which the teachers and all those who had a teaching role in the classroom – teaching assistants and nursery nurses, for example – *all* worked together to fully utilise and to improve their expertise. Chapter 9 describes the way the schools sought to fully engage the commitment of all the pupils and all the parents in their work. An important characteristic, which we describe in Chapter 10, was the way all the schools were very efficiently and effectively organised and managed. The final characteristic was the very real sense of support the schools received for their work and the validation and valuing of it from all those connected with them. We outline this contribution of the wider system in Chapter 11.

In Chapter 12, we examine the findings in relation to what is known about effective schools. We outline some of the key issues to emerge and explore how the various characteristics might work together to make these schools successful. Chapter 13 theorises some of the main findings and focuses in particular on issues such as the significance of the core work of the school, which we term the primary task, leadership, boundary management, why inclusivity is important, the containment of emotion and passion for 'Good Work', and systemic leadership for schools. We also offer a perspective on organising in the schools, which we have termed 'collaborative practice'. It was widespread in these schools and was a significant feature. The main dimensions of collaborative practice are collaboration, reflective practice and a focus on the primary task. In Chapter 14, we offer some final thoughts, reflections and concluding comments.

HOW TO USE THE BOOK

We have deliberately structured the book so that it can be used in a variety of ways. Here are some suggestions for how you might use the book.

If you want to get a very quick sense of what these schools did and how they did it then read Chapter 11. You will get an idea of the main outcomes of the research and a sense of how the characteristics of these schools compare with the widely accepted characteristics of 'effective

schools'. You will also get a feel for how the ways the schools worked contributed to their success.

If you are interested in finding out in detail what the schools were like – their features and characteristics – then we suggest you read Chapters 5 to 11. These chapters describe *what* the schools do.

Reading Chapter 2 and Chapters 4 to 12 will give you a sense of the issue we addressed, the research we undertook, the characteristics of the schools, how the features of the schools compared to those of 'effective schools' and *how* the characteristics contributed to the schools' success.

To find out why we think the schools were successful from a theoretical standpoint, we suggest you read Chapters 3 and 13. These two chapters together explain *why* the schools were successful.

If you want to know about very effective primary schools, what they do, how they do it and why it works, we suggest you read the whole book!

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A review of the literature

INTRODUCTION

Such is the breadth of scope of the issue we address in this book, it is difficult to imagine an aspect of the published literature on schools that would not be relevant in a literature review. We have thus decided to focus on a smaller number of particularly significant themes. In doing so, we acknowledge that we are being very selective and that we are clearly anticipating some of the key outcomes and setting a framework within which those outcomes can be considered. The way we have undertaken the review is to explore the literature that we thought would be relevant before we began collecting the data. This literature largely relates to the characteristics of effective schools. When the data collection was complete and we had categorised it into various themes, we then looked at the literature again to see what was relevant to what we had found that would enable us to understand the findings better.

Our intention in this chapter is to review the most important and relevant themes in the literature. The themes are as follows.

- key issues in school effectiveness;
- the characteristics of effective schools;
- organisational culture;
- contextual influences on effectiveness.

KEY ISSUES IN SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS

History and background

Over the last thirty years or so, there has been extensive research into school effectiveness and the factors that impact on effectiveness. During that time, school effectiveness has grown into a substantial field in educational research and its development continues. A key text in the field edited by Charles Teddlie and David Reynolds (Teddlie and Reynolds 2000) cites over 1,100 references on various aspects of school effectiveness

which is a testament to the substantial amount of work that has been amassed.

The major impetus for the initial development of school effectiveness research is generally acknowledged to have been the reaction to the view, prevalent in the 1960s, that the results pupils achieve at the end of their schooling are largely determined by their abilities when they start. This somewhat pessimistic, deterministic and, on reflection, counter-intuitive judgement that 'schools make no difference' was advanced by researchers such as Coleman et al. (1966) and Jencks et al. (1972). It was a widespread point of view in both in the UK and the US at that time. Those who held this view argued that the 'outcome' of schooling (pupil attainment) is determined by the input (pupil ability) and that the work of schools (the processes) has very little, if any, impact on pupil achievement (the outcomes).

Two important studies, one in the US and one in the UK, and the resultant publications were central in countering the 'schools make no difference' argument. In 1979 in the US, *School Social Systems and Student Achievements: Schools Can Make A Difference* was published by Wilbur B. Brookover and his co-workers (Brookover et al. 1979). In the same year in the UK, *Fifteen Thousand Hours* by Michael Rutter and his colleagues (Rutter et al. 1979) was published. Both studies indicated that schools in broadly similar settings and with similar intakes can exert very different effects on pupil outcomes, thus countering the deterministic and somewhat depressing orthodoxy. Other research undertaken during the 1980s supported these two studies and in 1990, Reynolds and Creemers were able to assert in the first edition of the journal *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* that:

> schools matter, that schools do have major effects on children's development and that, to put it simply, schools do make a difference.
>
> (Reynolds and Creemers 1990: 1)

This notion that 'schools do make a difference' has remained the central tenet of school effectiveness research and a considerable body of evidence now exists to support that view. Sammons (1999) cites 23 studies conducted in a variety of contexts on different age groups and in different countries that confirm the 'schools do make a difference' standpoint. She concludes that, although ability and family backgrounds exert a major influence on pupil attainment, "*schools in similar social circumstances can achieve very different levels of educational progress*" (Sammons, 1999: 191). Thus some schools are more effective than others, a conclusion which gives rise to a number of important questions, for example: 'How do we know some schools are more effective than others?' 'What is the nature of the effects that different schools have?' and 'What are effective schools like?' A

question that was important in the research we report here is 'Are there aspects of educational practice, which are not yet fully understood, that impact on educational effectiveness?'

Deciding which schools are effective

Mortimore (1991) defined an effective school as one in which students progress further than might be expected from a consideration of its intake. This simple and straightforward definition is helpful. It takes into account the starting capabilities and characteristics of the pupils at the beginning of their experience in a school and then seeks to define effectiveness by the amount of 'value added'. However, developing that definition and working with the notion that effectiveness is inherently comparative in nature is somewhat problematic.

Deciding on which schools are effective is not straightforward. The criteria for effectiveness are difficult to derive in both a non-normative and a normative way. Thus deriving a comprehensive and widely accepted definition of effectiveness is very complicated. Deciding on the criteria will always be affected by our value-laden expectations of schools that are derived from our experience and will thus be normative. So, for example, the government and the population at large may conclude that the aim of schools is to ensure that young people pass examinations. Regardless of the prevalence and the authority of such a view, it remains a value judgement, a normative statement. Hence the problem is complicated because there is no agreement on the aims for schools on which criteria and then judgements of effectiveness will be based. So a normative basis for effectiveness is difficult to derive. What is the aim of schooling? To prepare children to participate in a democracy? To enable young people to become independent thinkers? To prepare the young to become compliant workers in the capitalist economy? To fit children for their predetermined place in society? To make sure they gain essential skills? Probably most of these are valid aims and because of the diverse aims for schools, making judgements about school effectiveness even in a normative way is difficult. Furthermore, once the aims have been decided, determining the specific criteria by which these can be assessed is also complex and difficult. For example, if it is agreed that the aim of schools is to ensure that young people pass examinations, we could use examination results as a readily accessible measure and the criterion would be a certain percentage passing. We may use this measure and criterion even though we may not be sure exactly what they are measuring (the results may reflect for example the amount of privately funded support parents can afford to provide their children). But because the results are available we may use these despite any misgivings we have. In other words, the measure ends up determining the criteria and not the other way around.

Sammons (1994) argues that decisions about effectiveness are dependent upon a range of factors including the following.