

## REVIEWS

MACBEATH, J.; GRAY, J.; CULLEN, J.; FROST, D.; STEWARD, S.; SWAFFIELD, S.

***Schools on the Edge: Responding to Challenging Circumstances***

Paul Chapman Publishing, 2007, 156 pages.

'Schools on The Edge' is written by authors from the Faculty of Education at Cambridge University who have extensive experience of school effectiveness and school improvement. The book is based on the DfES funded in-depth evaluation study (2001–2005) of the governmental project 'Schools Facing Exceptionally Challenging Circumstances' (SFECC).

The book is divided into two halves. The first half examines life in disadvantaged "at-risk" communities, and maps various policy initiatives and responses to tackle persistent educational inequalities. It thus places the SFECC project in a wider policy context in England, giving an overview of policies aiming at providing opportunities for all students to succeed. The second half is mainly concerned with eight schools involved in the SFECC project, and analyses how various initiatives were realized at school level and what were the relative successes and failures of the project in eight schools. The first half thus captures the big picture (macro), while the second half examines the detail (micro/mezzo school level), and it is the natural interconnectedness of both halves that makes the book unique reading. The tension between the top-down and bottom-up approaches for addressing achievement gaps penetrates the whole book and one of the main questions it addresses is whether sustained improvement is possible in schools facing difficult circumstances.

Chapter 1 poses the question of whether every child matters to English schools, and to what extent English schools have been able to create opportunities for all children to succeed. Like every book written by authors working in the field of school effectiveness/improvement research, this book starts with how research into school effectiveness reacts to the "pessimistic" works of many authors (referring to Coleman, Bernstein, Kozol, etc.) who were questioning the role of schools in society and mainly their potential to tackle inequalities. This book provides a more positive picture of the role of schools in society. In reaction to findings that claim student outcomes are explained mainly by family background and to statements that "education cannot compensate for society", school effectiveness research proposed the opposite thesis that schools could make a difference to the lives and learning of young people.

Chapter 1 goes on to summarize the findings of school effectiveness research. The authors see its contribution mainly in the delimitation of the size of the school effect, in the descriptions of factors which may have contributed to this school effect and in the scope for change and improvement which these studies have opened up. However, the fact that the school's "social mix" reported by Coleman et

al. is considerably more important than other factors found by school effectiveness research (e.g. levels of teacher experience or resourcing), is openly admitted. The authors also refer to the problematic transfer from school effectiveness research into school improvement research.

The first chapter expresses the belief shared by the authors that schools could make a difference even for disadvantaged children from deprived areas where multiple disadvantages combine to make educational success difficult to attain.

Chapter 2 goes on to have a closer look at educational policy and its impact on educational inequalities. It starts its policy overview with the introduction of the comprehensive school system in England in 1965 (though it never became universally spread throughout England) that was seen as a major step towards closing the achievement gap. The next milestone to be referred to by the authors is the move to a common curriculum, a logical step following comprehensivisation and codified in the 1988 Act that put in place the National curriculum. Later on the agenda of choice, accountability and performance control was seen as an answer to persistent inequalities by policy-makers, even though it is widely questioned by the available research which shows the opposite effect – rising inequalities.

The authors continue to point out a few important policy initiatives that applied some form of positive discrimination at area or local authority level, namely the area-based approaches from Educational Priority Areas (EPA) in 1967, through Education Action Zones (EAZ) in 1998 to Excellence in Cities (EiC) introduced in 1999. They briefly describe a few other examples from half a century of initiatives and they suggest that for a large number of schools no significant sustained school improvement has been achieved by any such policies or initiatives.

The issues in the first two chapters are revisited in chapter 3 through the lens of communities and the exceptional challenges which they present to schools on the edge. The authors use the concept of social capital (mainly with reference to its three explanatory concepts – bonding-, bridging- and linking- social capital) to explain the differences in attitudes to school learning between the children from deprived and those from more affluent backgrounds. The concept of social capital stresses the importance of life outside the school; it moves our attention from school to community, to local environment, housing and social services, employment opportunities, health and crime levels. It is well documented that in schools serving disadvantaged areas learning is subject to a series of disruptions – temporary residence in different localities, transition between several schools, frequent absenteeism through ill health, etc. These schools have a disproportionate percentage of students with special educational needs, children from families where English is not the first language, recent immigrants, etc. The authors suggest that it cannot be assumed that the defining characteristics of an effective school can be applied to make an ineffective school more effective, especially in the case of schools facing multiple disadvantages.

Chapter 4 is the first chapter of the second half of the book, which concretely deals with the SFEC project. Chapter 4 provides case studies of the octet of schools chosen by the DES to join the project. Chapter 5 then discusses the project itself

and its various components and chapter 6 examines the performance of these eight schools during the SFECC project.

Chapter 4 is entitled "Schools of Hope" referring to one common feature of the eight schools - although they all served communities where hope had sometimes died, these eight schools themselves were places of hope for a better future. The aim of the project was to demonstrate that with the right kind of support even schools on the edge could turn failure into success. Presented case studies of eight secondary schools involved in the project show that even though these schools shared common indices of disadvantage, they were still quite different in many respects from each other.

Chapter 5 describes the core components of the project that had a number of strands: a reading programme to improve literacy, pedagogy underpinned by ICT (information and communication technologies), networking and focus on leadership. Each school received a direct funding of £150,000–£200,000 each year. In this chapter the authors point out some difficulties in putting into practice the different project components and their differing degrees of success in the eight schools. For example, a highly prescriptive reading, writing, spelling, vocabulary and writing programme for slow or hesitant readers was welcomed and judged as highly successful in four schools while it was totally refused as too prescriptive and ineffective in others. The authors add that there was a little independent evidence of the success of this particular reading programme during the period when the SFECC project chose to incorporate it.

Some components of the project were not well prepared and thus their potential was lost, as in the case of schools networking through video-conferencing, where the quality of video was insufficient for sharing student work and classroom practice and the website for video posting and sharing was set up tardily.

Among all eight schools developing and extending leadership has proved to be working well. The creation of a School Improvement Group (SIG) with five to nine staff members who act as evaluators of practice and promoters of change, was widely seen as the most successful aspect of the SFECC project. All members of SIG underwent special training organized in six two-day sessions over a two-year period, including topics such as effective teaching, formative assessment and data to inform teaching and learning. The authors found that regular training over two years and teamwork within each SIG drawing together staff from different departments was a key factor in success and that the SIGs had acted as "engines of change". At the end of this chapter the authors posit themselves and partly answer a more general question in relation to this project as well as to other policy initiatives, namely: Can governments change schools?

Chapter 6 deals with measuring improvement in the octet of schools. The authors used different criteria for measuring improvements in these schools: a comparison of each school's performance with their previous best; pupil progress as „added value“; comparison between the eight schools involved in the project and similar schools and the effect and results of the SFECC Project compared with other policy initiatives. The authors discuss the limitation and nature of these four

approaches to evaluation and suggest that using all these approaches at once is preferable to limiting the evaluation to one of them. Different ways of looking at a school's performance tend to give different results. The only common characteristic for these different measures is the certainty that progress across schools in any initiative is likely to be variable. Some schools make considerable progress while others make less, as was also the case in the SFECC project.

In the final chapter, chapter 7, entitled "Schools for the future", the authors discuss more general findings that arose from the evaluation of the programme. They consider the top-down approach to change applied by the SFECC project to be its central failing and they suggest a more collaborative bottom-up approach to be used in future. In this chapter the authors offer nine salutary lessons for policy-makers, that are, I believe, internationally valid as is their final statement: "A society that is committed to offering all its citizens equal opportunities has no choice about whether to have policies for schools in "exceptionally challenging circumstances". Stated baldly, the gap between schools serving mainstream communities and those on the edge is not just large but, in most people's view, unacceptably so. The moral case for intervention should be taken as read, but whatever action is launched in the name of social justice, it should be approached with sensitivity, support and receptiveness to research, combined with a firm grasp on the lessons of history."

*David Greger*

*Contact details:* David Greger, ÚVRV PedF UK, Myslíkova 7, Praha 1, 110 00, Czech Republic; [david.greger@pedf.cuni.cz](mailto:david.greger@pedf.cuni.cz)