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REVIEW ARTICLE

SCHOOLS DO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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We are all very much aware of the life circumstances of many Aboriginal children. Many live in extreme poverty; their health is often poor; conditions for home study are often lacking; many parents had little opportunity for schooling when they were young and feel they cannot help their children with their school work. Some speak a form of English which is different from the English of the classroom and of the school text books. Very large numbers are unemployed and teachers claim that the children see no point in education, that the real problem is that they lack motivation.

On top of this, prejudice against Aborigines is by no means a thing of the past; to be aware of this, one has only to read the newspapers and also the annual reports of the Commissioner for Community Relations where he describes the discrimination often experienced by Aborigines and the negative stereotypes often held by white people.

Against this background, many teachers come to feel that there is little the schools can do to help Aboriginal children learn; that the problems are so great that until there is a considerable improvement in the socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions of Aboriginal people, particularly in the urban and rural areas where the people do not follow a tradition-oriented life, there is little the schools can do.

Some of the earlier studies of minority group children and their schools supported this view. For example, the major study by Coleman and his associates on equality of opportunity in the United States¹ and the Plowden Report on primary school children in Britain,² concluded that the home and community conditions of children were much more important than the schools in determining children's success at school.

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But these studies did not really get inside the schools. They concentrated on very broad factors - such as the resources of the schools. And, moreover, they looked at large numbers of children at one point in time and compared the means of various groups.

A recent study is, however, worth our very close examination. The researchers actually got inside the schools and related children's achievements to what actually happened in the schools. This study was conducted in the disadvantaged inner areas of London:

Rutter, M., Maughan, B., Mortimore, P., Ouston, J.,
with Smith, A., 1979: *Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary
Schools and Their Effects on Children* Open Books, London.

Basically the Rutter study was a longitudinal study. Children were studied in 1970 at the age of ten, just before they finished primary school. Their intellectual levels and reading achievements were assessed, and information was gained on their behaviour and their family circumstances. Their parents were interviewed and teachers provided information on the children's emotional and behavioural difficulties. They were studied through to age 14 when they had been enrolled at secondary school for three years.

Most of these children (about two-thirds) then went on to some twenty comprehensive secondary schools in the inner London area. Twelve of the schools were selected for special study. The performance of all the children attending these schools was checked to make sure that the 'cohort' children (those studied at the age of 10) were similar to the total group in the school.

The picture of the children on entry to the secondary schools shows that they were well below the national average (one in five at the age of 10 years had a reading age below 7 years 8 months); the children also had a high rate of emotional and behavioural difficulties. The families had high rates of adversity: nearly a quarter of the children had fathers in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs; over a third had four or more children; over half lived in overcrowded homes; over a quarter of the mothers had some kind of handicapping psychiatric disorder (mostly depressive conditions); over a quarter of the fathers had been convicted of some offence and 8 per cent had been in prison; 11 per cent of the children were living in homes broken by death or divorce. The authors make the important point:

Although the *rate* of family adversity was particularly high in the area, nevertheless it was still true that the *majority* of children came from ordinary happy homes that were fairly unexceptionable. (p.34)

The twelve secondary schools studied were comparable in many ways, but there were also differences - in size and in space; some were on the one site while others were spread over several different sites; they varied in sporting facilities, in age and maintenance of buildings; some were maintained by the local educational authority, while others were church schools (voluntary aided). The schools varied, too, in style of leadership, in the way they exercised pastoral care of the students. They differed, too, in their aims - some were committed to the development of the children's personalities as their major aim, some stressed as the first requirement the passing of examinations; some stressed teaching moral codes while others stressed making the school experience enjoyable and rewarding for the children.

Parents were able to nominate the school they would prefer their children to attend, but not all children were able to attend the school of their first choice.

It was the differences *between* schools that the researchers investigated; they found that *these differences had important implications for the children in the schools.*

The researchers approached their task in a number of ways: children were tested and interviewed; teachers and principals were interviewed; and, over two years of the study, research workers were attached to each of the schools to *observe and study what was actually happening.*

The *outcome measures* the study concentrated on were:

1) children's attendance:

If schools are going to have any kind of impact on their pupils it is necessary that they attend with a fair degree of regularity. It seemed reasonable to suppose that good attendance should be considered as a necessary (but clearly far from sufficient) prerequisite for school success. (p.48)

2) pupil behaviour:

We used items such as truancy and absconding, arriving late for lessons, damage and graffiti, pupil violence, disruptive behaviour in the classroom, as well as adherence to the prevailing school rules on uniform and being on task in lessons. (p.48)

3) examination success:

the success of children in the public examinations at the end of fifth year was recorded, but since these examinations are not devised for the least able 40 per cent of the population the researchers obtained measures on the ex-pupils' employment one year after leaving school (length of time to obtain the first job, number of jobs in the first year, dismissal from jobs, involvement in further training, level of work and job satisfaction).

4) delinquency:

Evidence showed marked differences between secondary schools in rates of delinquency:

The implication was that in some way some schools managed to exercise a protective effect by which delinquency rates were held lower than those at other schools. (p.49)

The four major conclusions of the study were:

First, our investigation clearly showed that secondary schools varied markedly with respect to their pupils' behaviour, attendance, exam success and delinquency. This had been observed before, but the demonstration that these differences remained *even after taking into account differences in their intake* was new. This suggested that, contrary to many views, secondary schools *do* have an important influence on their pupils' behaviour and attainments.

Secondly, we found that these variations in outcome were systematically and strongly associated with the characteristics of schools as social institutions. The pattern of findings suggested that the associations reflected a causal relationship. There were indications from previous studies that this might well be the case but it had not previously been systematically demonstrated by comparing different secondary schools.

Thirdly, the research showed *which* school variables were associated with good behaviour and attainments and which were not.

Fourth, the pattern of findings suggested that not only were pupils influenced by the way they were dealt with as individuals, but also there was a group influence

resulting from the ethos of the school as a social institution.

We may conclude that the results carry the strong implication that schools can do much to foster good behaviour and attainments, and that even in a disadvantaged area, schools can be a force for the good.
(p.205)

The report is of particular interest in the descriptions offered of the differences between the schools as social institutions - the differences that mattered in terms of their effects on the pupils. It is important to note that physical and administrative features¹ of the twelve schools were *not* associated with the outcome measures of attendance, behaviour, examination success or delinquency rates.

The summary conclusions are reported on each of the school variables which emerged as significantly associated with the outcomes for the children.²

1. Academic emphasis

The researchers explored a number of aspects of the academic emphasis revealed by the practices of the twelve schools; for example, they looked at homework and found that schools that set homework frequently and where there was a check on whether staff in fact set homework, tended to have better outcomes than schools that made little use of homework. There was a positive relationship between the setting of homework and pupils' behaviour in school and also their scholastic achievement. As the researchers point out, there is no way of knowing how and why homework is associated with these outcomes, but they postulate that it may be that as well as providing opportunities for practice and consolidation, homework may also be of symbolic importance in emphasising the school's concern for academic progress and its expectations that pupils have the ability and the self-discipline needed to work without direct supervision.

Another aspect of academic emphasis which was explored was the expectations that teachers have for their pupils. Teachers working with middle-ability level youngsters at the third year high

¹ The only association that seemed to hold was the single site v. split site.

² It is not possible to do full justice to the study in as brief a review as this.

school level were asked how many of their pupils they expected to get 'O' level passes or 'CSE' grade passes in each subject. There was large variation from school to school with some schools estimating only 2½% of their pupils as likely to achieve such passes, while other schools' estimates were as high as 45%. The schools' scores on this measure were found to correlate significantly with both attendance and academic outcomes. The researchers believe that this is not merely a reflection that teachers are good judges of children's abilities because when they compared teacher expectations with the intakes in each of the schools they found that two of the schools who were in the bottom third with regard to academic expectation were in the top third with regard to the children's measured abilities on entry to the secondary school.

Other aspects of the academic emphasis revealed by school campuses also proved to be significant. For example, schools which displayed children's work on classroom walls tended to have a better outcome; the proportion of the school week actually devoted to teaching was positively related with pupil attendance; the proportion of children using the school library was related to both attendance and academic outcomes. Schools where the teachers planned together on curriculum matters tended to be more successful than the schools where teachers worked on their own to a much greater extent with little co-ordination between teachers in the same department; these results held for both good attendance and low delinquency.

The researchers summed up this evidence on the academic emphasis of the school as follows:

The findings as a whole suggest that children tended to make better progress both behaviourally and academically, in schools which placed an appropriate emphasis on academic matters. This emphasis might be reflected in a well planned curriculum, in the kinds of expectations teachers had of the children they taught, and in the setting and marking of homework. It is also relevant, perhaps, that when we asked pupils what they thought were the most important goals or functions of schooling, they consistently selected 'instrumental' goals such as examination success and preparation for jobs. Evidently, schools which organised their approach to ensure some emphasis on academic matters not only achieved better results but also were more likely to be fulfilling their pupils' expectations.

2. Teacher actions in lessons

Teacher actions were assessed during systematic observations of one week's lessons with a third-year class in each school, with a record being kept of the proportion of the teacher's time being spent on the subject matter of the lesson; teachers varied in the amount of time they spent on setting up equipment, handing out papers, dealing with disciplinary problems and so on. Indeed, the average time per school spent on the lesson topic varied from 65% to over 85%. It was found, not surprisingly, that pupil behaviour was better in the schools where a higher proportion of the time was spent on the actual subject matter of the lesson. There was not such a marked relationship with the children's achievement. Some schools averaged as much as 13% of the time on non-teaching behaviour and in these schools, behaviour was significantly poor. As the researchers comment, if the children are attentive and well-behaved then there is the opportunity for effective teaching and productive learning, but whether these occur depends upon the use that teachers make of this opportunity; thus it is the use made of the opportunity which is crucial in determining how much the children learn. Another aspect of interest was the extent to which schools differed in the timing of the lessons, that is in terms of whether the lessons ran for the full allocated time or finished early. Where lessons finished early there was a strong tendency for worse outcomes for the children in behaviour, in attendance and in academic achievement.

3. Rewards and punishments

The researchers noted that the types of rewards and punishments used varied considerably between the 12 schools. There were no strong associations between levels of punishment and the various outcomes that were assessed. However, it was found that where there were general standards of classroom discipline expected at the school (in contrast to each teacher setting her own standards) academic results were better and there were fewer incidences of delinquency. The researchers suggest that the particular rules and approaches to discipline may be less important than the existence of some generally recognized and accepted set of standards.

There were, by contrast, strong links between the rewards that were used and the frequency of rewards and student outcomes. All forms of reward, praise or appreciation tended to be associated with better outcomes.

4. Pupil conditions

The twelve schools varied considerably in the extent to which they provided a pleasant and comfortable environment for the children. It was found that where schools did take such an approach the children did better in examination performance.

5. Responsibilities and participation

The researchers found that the extent to which children were given an opportunity to take responsibility and to participate in the running of their school lives had a highly significant association with the outcomes that were measured. For example, students were asked whether they had ever held positions of responsibility in their class; the number reporting that they had held such positions varied from as low as 7% at one school to as high as 50% at another school. It was found that the higher the percentage of children who had held such places of responsibility the better the level of pupil behaviour and academic success. The same results were found when consideration was given to whether the pupils had ever participated in school assemblies or house or year meetings. Again the schools varied in terms of the degree to which students were given responsibility for making sure that they brought to lessons their books, folders and writing materials, and schools in which the children were expected to take responsibility for their own things had better outcomes with respect to attendance, behaviour and delinquency.

6. Stability of teaching staff

During the period of the study there was high teacher turnover so that few of the children in fact experienced much continuity of teachers. But the study showed that in these 12 schools there were no observable academic advantages in striving to ensure that children were always taught by the same teacher. This is an interesting result which perhaps can be accounted for through the sort of planning that takes place within the school. This is addressed in the next issue.

7. Staff organization

A number of aspects were explored here. Firstly, consideration was given to whether teachers had freedom in planning the courses that they were teaching; it was found that schools where most teachers planned jointly tended to have better attendance and less delinquency.

In the less successful schools teachers were often left completely alone to plan what to teach with little guidance from their senior colleagues and little co-ordination with other teachers to ensure continuity of courses from year to year. A second variable that was looked at was checking of the teachers' work. In schools where work was checked (for example with setting of homework) there was a better academic outcome for the students. The researchers comment:

...good morale and the routine of people working harmoniously together as part of an efficient system meant that both supervision and support were available to teachers in a way which was absent in less successful schools. In some schools with relatively poor outcomes teachers appeared very isolated, teaching their own syllabus with little interest being taken in what they were doing or how they were doing it. (p.137)

8. Skills of teachers

The researchers indicate that they had no measure of teaching ability as such but they make the important observation:

Our observations suggested that it was very much easier to be a good teacher in some schools than it was in others. The overall ethos of the school seemed to provide support and a context which facilitated good teaching. Teaching performance is a function of the school environment as well as of personal qualities. (p.139)

Overall school process effect

Looking at all the school process variables, Rutter and his associates concluded:

There was a very strong and highly consistent correlation (0.92) between overall school process and pupil behaviour. The correlation with academic attainment (0.76) was also very substantial indeed, although not quite as strong as that with pupil behaviour. The relationship between school process and attendance was also strong and consistent, apart from one school with particularly poor attendance in spite of an average school process score...The correlation (0.68) with delinquency was about the same. (p.142-144)

The researchers also turned their attention to ecological influences - the communities from which the pupils were drawn. Relationships were complex; the researchers concluded:

The main finding is that various aspects of the balance of intake to schools are significantly associated with pupil outcome, and particularly with children's attendance and delinquency. On the other hand, the effects of intake balance appear surprisingly separate from children's observed behaviour in school, and from our many measures of different features of school process or functioning... ...children's individual characteristics, the balance of a school's intake and school processes all have significant associations with outcome.

This study has been summarized in some detail because it so clearly demonstrates that the *schools that children attend do make a difference.*

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References

1. Coleman, J.S. *et al.*, 1966 : *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. Washington U.S. Government Printing Office.
2. Plowden Report, 1967: *Children and Their Primary Schools*. HMSO.

(The title of the book arose from the fact that children spend some 15,000 hours of their lives at school during the years of compulsory schooling).

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