Reading 10

Study of effective schools – summary of major findings

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Notes

Formal accountability mechanisms such as we have seen in Readings 9 a, b, and c go a long way towards ensuring that South African teachers will be able to deliver service of an acceptable standard. But formal mechanisms can only do the three things that, according to Linda Darling Hammond, they should do:

- set educationally meaningful standards or benchmarks for what is to be expected in good practice;
- establish practical means by which such standards can be upheld; and
- provide redress or ways of correcting shortcomings when a teacher falls short.

Formal accountability mechanisms such as codes of conduct and systems of appraisal cannot finally ***motivate*** teachers to deliver the kind of dedicated service that teaching often requires. This is where a personally held ***sense of responsibility*** becomes important, especially in situations that are not likely to be observed by anyone with the task of appraising teachers' practice. Such a sense of responsibility tends to be a sign of a teacher who is intrinsically motivated by the needs of learners rather than by her or his own needs and desires – in other words, by a teacher with a sense of vocation.

The need for this sort of responsibility is also apparent where a whole school may have a very limited vision of its function and task – Fataar and Patterson describe this sort of school in Reading 4 (see 'Moral diffusion').

This edited extract is form Christie, P. and Potterton, M. 1997. ***School Development in South Africa: A Research Project to Investigate Strategic Interventions for Quality Improvement in South African Schools: Final Report, 1997***. Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press.

Reading 10 is a brief extract from a report in which researchers Christie and Potterton describe the key factors that they found in those South African schools that demonstrated resilience in the face of difficulties. This excerpt focuses on only one of these factors: a shared ***sense of responsibility*** on the part of the teachers on the staff – a moral responsibility that goes ***beyond*** accountability and prevents teachers from seeing themselves as victims, or as helpless (both of these self-images are hostile to the idea of teachers as professionals).

Reading

Resilient schools

The schools we selected for study were remarkable in that they functioned where others failed. All of them managed to survive, if not thrive, in contexts where neighbouring schools showed the ***symptoms*** of crisis and what has come to be termed 'the breakdown of the culture of teaching and learning' in historically black schools. 'Success against the odds' sums up what we saw, as does the term 'resilience', developed by Margaret Wang and colleagues working in inner city schools in the USA (***Wang & Iglesias, 1996***). Resilience, in this sense, refers to the ability to survive and develop in contexts of extreme adversity. In the words of Vaillant, 'Resilience conveys both the capacity to be bent without breaking and the capacity, once bent, to spring back.' (1993: 284)

symptoms: signs of the existence of something bad

Most of the schools we describe struggled with problems in their environments, the depth and difficulties of which need to be fully acknowledged. Almost all of the schools (except for the few historically white schools) were in communities wracked by poverty and unemployment, and sometimes by violence. They were usually not far from schools that were overwhelmed by the difficulties of their environments and their histories. Yet these schools were resilient. They were not free of problems; rather, their resilience manifested in the ways they faced and resolved problems stemming from both their environments and themselves. In the words of a teacher at William Pescod Senior School (Northern Cape), 'We have our problems but we are surviving'. The schools in our study were often vulnerable and struggling, showing us that resilience is not an attribute that is possessed in a static or permanent way. Yet, in spite of their difficulties, they were able to provide a purposeful and supportive framework for learning and teaching to their students and staff.

For example, the schools we visited in Schauderville township in the Eastern Cape (St Teresa's and St James') operated in the midst of violent gang warfare, yet managed to provide sufficiently safe havens for their teachers and students. At Modderdam School in the Western Cape, teachers spoke of supporting traumatized and sometimes suicidal

students. Schools in KwaZulu-Natal spoke of political violence and faction fighting around them. At Vela Langa Primary School in the Northern Cape, ordinary class teachers spoke of their work with students' social problems as well as their learning difficulties. Working together, teachers and students managed to transform the dusty, arid landscape around the school into a garden.

A good reminder of the fragility of resilient schools is Thabula High school, selected for inclusion in the study by the Valley Trust, even though problems had closed it earlier in the year. At the time of our visit, extra classes before and after school were catching up on time missed and preparing students for the examinations ahead. The principal was full of praise for staff and students, and confident that matriculation results would be as good as usual.

Our research suggests that resilience stems from a number of sources, the exact strands of which cannot always be untangled. What follows are some of the features of the resilient schools we studied. Not all were present in all schools in the same ways.

Sense of responsibility

Perhaps the key feature of the resilient schools we visited is that they showed, albeit in different ways, a sense of responsibility for themselves and their functioning. The most significant manifestation of this was willingness and ability to take initiatives. Put generally, resilient schools are able to recognize what sorts of things they are able to do for themselves, to muster necessary resources, and to act. This can be in small ways within the school (like sweeping classrooms and picking up papers in playgrounds); reaching out in ways that do not particularly need resources (like bringing community people into the school to sell food or to help with maintaining school boundaries so that drugs and alcohol are not sold through fences); or reaching out more substantially in ways that do involve acquiring resources (e.g. raising money to build a fence or buy computers, often from people outside the school).

agency: ability to take an active role

The key point here is a preparedness to act, a move from passivity and victimhood to active ***agency.*** It is exemplified in a statement made to one of us on a visit to a non-functioning school earlier in the year. 'This door has been lying here for two years and the Department has done nothing about it.' We can confidently surmise that in a resilient school with a sense of responsibility, a means would have been found within the school or its community to hang a door. We found many instances of schools doing small and sometimes big things for themselves in ways that showed preparedness to take responsibility for themselves, and we came to interpret this as a significant feature of resilience.

No doubt the lack of agency in many South African schools can be traced directly back to apartheid and the years of opposition to it. A destructive feature of apartheid, including apartheid education, was the systematic denial of democratic rights to black people, reducing their sphere of agency in crucial ways. Under apartheid education, school principals had no discretionary spending capacity, little influence over hiring and firing of staff, and almost no curriculum decision-making powers. Decades of resistance to apartheid education challenged the legitimacy of apartheid authority structures, often compounding the lack of power on the part of school management.

Yet, while it is important to understand the force of these general social patterns, it is also important not to accord them ***determinist*** powers. It is important to recognise that some schools at least were able to retain or develop a power to act for themselves, in small and sometimes big ways. And we would argue that this sense of agency and responsibility is a key feature of resilient schools. Whether it is a cause or an indicator of resilience is debatable. However, we would suggest that acting, rather than reacting, is itself an impetus towards resilience; being passive and 'out of control' is itself likely to be a source of stress and a further impetus towards passivity.

determinist: here, means absolute power

If a sense of responsibility is a key characteristic of resilient schools, it follows that policies for school improvement need to foster this sense of responsibility, for example in working towards moving appropriate decision-making to school level. Forms of assistance that 'help' schools by doing things for them are more likely to bind them into passivity than to help them to restore their operations.