



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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