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ABSTRACT

Educational research often defines educational goals narrowly by reading levels or Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores and equally narrowly correlates student success in these areas with the content of the curriculum or time spent in learning. According to Rutter et al., secondary schools with a good ethos create students who perform well according to cognitive, affective and behavioral measures, while schools with a poor ethos create the reverse. In their study of secondary schooling, "Fifteen Thousand Hours," Rutter and his associates found a cluster of factors that promote a good secondary school ethos: (1) student-student and student-teacher cohesion; (2) a strong academic emphasis; (3) high teacher expectations; (4) positive attitudes toward students; (5) stress on positive rewards; and (6) consistent and shared values and standards. Points from several studies are referred to, and references are provided in this two-page research summary. (JW)

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Secondary School Ethos and the Academic Success of Urban Minority Students

Educational research often defines educational goals narrowly by reading levels or SAT scores and equally narrowly correlates student success in these areas with the content of the curriculum or the time spent in learning. Even the "effective schooling" literature has tended to look only at student achievement and to relate it to a half-dozen school variables: a principal's instructional leadership, the teachers' positive expectations of their students, and so forth.

Although secondary schools are expected above all to produce *academic* achievement, they are also meant to *socialize* students—to give them social values, morality and norms; to work with their *developmental* potential in leading students away from an egocentric view of the world and in teaching them the capacity to differentiate and integrate a wide variety of experience; and to impart *vocational* proficiencies and values, including discipline, perserverance, punctuality, and pride in work (8)*. Moreover, academic success in students is clearly related to their behavior in other areas, their attitudes, and their emotions. Not surprisingly, recent evidence also suggests that schools that yield better examination scores also foster better attitudes and behavior and have lower delinquency rates among their students (12).

In fact, in their important and careful study of secondary schooling, *Fifteen Thousand Hours*, Rutter and his associates point out that, when one looks at factors creating effective schools, the combined effect of the many contributing variables is much greater than the *sum* of separate, individual factors. The authors call this whole which is greater than the sum of its parts the school's *ethos*.

According to Rutter et al., those secondary schools having a good ethos create students who perform well according to cognitive, affective, and behavioral measures, while schools with a poor ethos create the reverse. In other words, any one school has an ethos which leads to or doesn't lead to a general success and well-being among its students.

What comprises the ethos of an effective school?

The work of Rutter et al. points to a cluster of factors in promoting a good secondary school ethos; these include student-student and student-teacher cohesion, a strong academic emphasis, high teacher expectations and positive attitudes toward their students, a stress on positive rewards, and consistent and shared values and standards. While the authors stress the interdependence of these factors, their analysis corroborates in many respects those variables isolated by the effective schooling literature as well as recent studies of comprehensive high schools, alternative schools, desegregated schools, and private schools. Where discrepancies occur, the cause may be the narrow, or simply different, perspectives of these latter bodies of research. Yet discrepancies can also be reconciled by using them to go below the surface and uncover deeper commonalities.

School Size and Student Cohesion

Several recent reviews of a wide variety of research on school violence and the comprehensive high school assert the importance of school size in contributing to a peaceful or disruptive atmosphere (4, 1, 6). The rationale for most alternative schools, and the major evaluations of these programs reiterate the doctrine that small is peaceful, particularly for students who are likely to be marginal (7, 9). Yet Rutter et al. found school size to be of little importance as a factor in a good school ethos; instead, in a related finding, they point to the need to both keep students together as they proceed through school from year to year, and prevent rotating them from class to class each period. Allowing students to remain together each day and through the high school years prevents the alienation that is common to the large school and promotes student cohesion.

Wide Student Participation

Clearly the effects of size can be partly counterbalanced by other factors that promote unity. One of these, which has been somewhat controversial, is student participation, although there is also evidence that participation, particularly by marginal students, declines with school size. Although Gottfredson and Daiger (4) report little positive effect of student participation in decreasing school violence, Rutter et al. find the opposite to be true. Their findings indicate that where a high proportion of students are given active roles in assemblies, school meetings, and other positions of responsibility, and where teachers and students share extracurricular activities, the schools show better outcomes in pupil behavior and examination success—that is, have a better school ethos. Rutter et al. hypothesize that giving responsibility to students creates better academic and social behavior because it conveys trust and sets standards of maturity as well as generates more positive attitudes toward schooling through the mechanism of identification. Since Gottfredson & Daiger do not describe what they mean by student participation, they may have included activities in the term that simply did not give students real responsibility, a genuine voice, or an authentic means of identification.

Strong Academic Atmosphere, High Expectations for Student Success, and a Stress on Positive Rewards

Rutter et al. point to the issue of what is taught and how it is taught as essential to school ethos. In their findings—which are strongly corroborated by most of the other secondary schooling literature as well as studies of effective schooling—a good school

*Numbers in parentheses indicate references.

ethos is created by a strong academic atmosphere, high expectations for student success, and a stress on positive rewards. There should be vigorous lesson plans which allow little waste of time and elicit high performance standards. Homework should be regular and consistent, and high standards should be used for marking (with grades not being used for disciplinary purposes). Reactions to students' performance should be immediate and should stress its positive aspects. Punishment, particularly when it is corporal, actually tends to be associated with poor attendance and delinquency.

Consistent and Shared Values and Standards

Fifteen Thousand Hours points to the importance of consistent and shared values and standards in regard to both academic excellence and discipline. The theme of the need for values and standards is reiterated throughout studies of secondary schooling. Alternative schools, which have grown out of perceived deficiencies in the comprehensive high schools, have been characterized by conscious attempts to create more explicit and holistic goals than are generally found in public high schools (10).

A recent study, *Catholic High Schools and Minority Students* (5), also isolates the issue of values as particularly crucial in creating successful academic as well as disciplinary climates. Although part of the effectiveness of Catholic schools for these students is attributed by the author to the higher quality of the instruction and the more effective discipline, the influence of the religious order per se, with its self-conscious ideology and explicit system of values, has an independent and direct effect on school effectiveness.

Clearly, strong values, goals, and purposes can be directed toward authoritarian as well as egalitarian ends—toward a racist vision as well as one of equality. The literature on public school desegregation adds a clarification and warning about the destructive effects of a school which does not have both a uniform and shared system of values. Different standards for discipline and suspensions, as well as practices such as tracking and special classes which resegregate minorities, or poorly planned busing programs which bus only minority students and restrict their participation in extracurricular activities all serve to decrease their trust in the school system, to play havoc with their self-esteem, and to create friction between them and the preferred white students (3, 11). That these biased values and unfair standards are also destructive to white students may be less immediately evident, though clearly the arrogance bred from preference is not conducive to a democratic, civic-minded society of adults.

Still, as Greeley's research, as well as another recent study of private, independent school education by Coleman, et al. (2) make clear, legal mandates and bureaucratic alterations are no substitute for personal attention and clear and strong beliefs and values. Although the federal and local courts have subjected public schools to numerous legal strictures to ensure fairness over the past fifteen years, students in both Catholic and private, independent schools are much more likely to see their schools as fair than are public school students. Yet in our pluralistic society, it is particularly difficult for a public school principal or teacher to act with confidence in the area of beliefs and values. Although it is both understandable and unfortunate, educators, out of fear of disagreement and conflict, are too likely to resort to mechanical solutions, approaches which increase specialization and fragmentation, and legalese.

—Carol Ascher, Ph.D.

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