

From Districts to Classrooms: Findings for a Contextualized Agenda of School Change

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This section presents the second of two selections of papers presented at the 26th International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI) organized and hosted in Santiago by Fundación Chile in partnership with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) University of Toronto January 3-6, 2013. ICSEI is an international association and community of scholars and school system personnel committed to the investigation and promotion of school effectiveness and improvement for all (www.icsei.net).

The conference theme for ICSEI 2013 was “Educational Systems for School Effectiveness and Improvement: Exploring the Alternatives”. Within this broad focus, the conference papers addressed school effectiveness and improvement issues and practices at the national, regional and local levels related to four areas: (a) systems of educational governance; (b) systems of accountability and support; (c) whole school improvement; and (d) classroom practice. For this and the previous issue of *Pensamiento Educativo* we invited a selection of Latin American and international presenters to submit manuscripts of their presentations that touched on one or more of these areas. In keeping with the conference theme, the papers included are research studies that portray “alternatives” to traditional ways of thinking about and addressing school effectiveness and improvement. Four articles appear in this issue of *Pensamiento Educativo*. Another four papers appeared in the previous issue (*Pensamiento Educativo. Revista de Investigación Educativa Latinoamericana*, 2013, pp. 5-96).

Sebring and Montgomery present findings from a longitudinal investigation of school improvement in Chicago’s public elementary schools by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR). The CCSR began studying school improvement progress and factors influencing that progress in the early 1990s following the passage of a State law in 1988 that decentralized the school system, shifting significant authority from the central office to individual schools. Their studies led to the identification of Five Essential Supports for School Improvement that were associated with more and less improvement in student achievement test scores in language and mathematics and in attendance in individual schools. These included effective school leadership, teachers’ professional capacity, parent-community ties, student-centered learning climate, and instructional guidance to teachers. Once these key supports were identified, teacher and student surveys were administered every two years to track the strength of those factors in each school and their relationship to movement in student outcomes.

Over time, the researchers discovered that schools that were strong on three to five of the Essential Supports were ten times more likely to improve than schools that were weak on three to five Supports. The studies also revealed that the quality of relations of trust between teachers, teachers and school leaders, and the community were a key underlying condition that influenced the prospects for improvement in any of the Essential Supports and, consequently, of student outcomes. The article summarizes findings from a comprehensive account of the CCSR studies found in Bryk et al. (2010). This investigation and its findings mark a significant advance in traditional school effectiveness studies in several ways. First, It monitors changes in student outcomes and school conditions associated with variability in student outcomes longitudinally (over 15 years), rather than at a single point in time. Second, it examines the interactions between key factors (i.e., the Five Essential Supports and trust) affecting improvement, rather than presenting and analyzing them solely as independent correlates of school effectiveness and improvement. Third, it employs value added measures of school progress that take into account differences in school and community contexts. And fourth, it included all Chicago public elementary schools not just high and low performing outliers, as in the case of many effective schools studies.

In their article *Sebring and Montgomery* describe how the findings and research instruments (e.g., the surveys) from the CCSR investigations have been developed into a set of diagnostic tools for school self-assessment in relation to the Five Essential Supports. Teachers and students rate the strength of the Essential Supports on validated survey items and scales. The school diagnostic surveys result in an online school report that compares how the schools score on the Essential Supports absolutely and relative to other schools in the Chicago schools system. *Sebring and Montgomery* then provide an illustration of how one school used the data generated by these tools to identify focuses for school improvement (e.g., leadership, school capacity), to investigate their weaknesses, to plan and implement changes to strengthen performance in those areas, and to track their progress over a three year period. The article concludes with a reflection on the sustained partnership between the University of Chicago CCSR researchers and the mobilization and use of the research results for school improvement.

Hubbard and Martinez claims that power has not been given the research consideration it deserves as a layer of influence in school reform. According to the authors, the understanding of school reforms failure have not been well researched since power dimension of organizations has been ruled out by researchers. Power is a central feature of the education reform process both in development and in implementation. This paper overcomes a traditional reductionism in most of school leadership field where organizational conflicts, disputes, and negotiation is unobserved as an explanatory dimension of school reform limits. Thus, in their paper, *Hubbard and Martinez* offer in-depth account of subtle, nuanced confrontations and disagreements between principals and district leaders. It then focuses on the links between schools and intermediate-level of school systems which are another aspect generally neglected by researchers. In doing that, they focus on the Linked Learning reform designed in California in U.S to improve educational outcomes for students who had little interest in or engagement with school. As the authors remark, they studied “factors that seemed to present the greatest challenges for principals and district leaders as they began putting the reform into practice”. To achieve such purposes, the authors use a social constructivist perspective in order to shed light on the interactional encounters in which policy decisions are made. Using this framework, *Hubbard and Martinez* attempts to uncover the micro and daily social face-to-face interactions between principals and district authorities in relation to their concrete problems during actual reform implementation. Concerning about the role that power play in school reform, the authors addresses four research questions: (a) What kind of relationship exists between district and school leaders and how does the relationship impact implementation of the reform model? (b) What are the barriers to effective relationships between district leaders and school principals? (c) What role does power play in these relationships? (d) What strategies or mechanisms are in place to improve dialogue and collaboration between the district office and principals? With such clear purposes, the paper is based on a comprehensive qualitative study of Linked Learning (LL) program whose fieldwork was collected during 2012 in two phases in five California districts where LL was being implemented. The five districts had principals who were receiving coaching through a principal preparation program associated with a local University. Interviews, observations, focus groups were conducted on principals, principal coaches, district superintendents, and coaches who worked for the district. During the second phase focus group was conducted to 50 LL principals and district leaders.

Hubbard and Martinez found that principals’ leadership experiences have been formed by district leaders’ predisposition to rely on “power over” strategies. Individual, structural and cultural factors

contributed to unequal power relations that led principals to call for a move to a “power with” approach fostering more opportunities for collaborative interactions with their superintendent and with their LL colleagues. According to principals, their work implementing LL reform was obstructed by structural arrangements that encouraged that some voices and perspectives were privileged over others. This study’s findings suggest that unequal power relations need to be substituted by greater balance in the distribution of authority if genuine reform change is aimed.

The *Moriconi’s paper* offers a novel and incipient way in Latin America to assess teacher effects. Firstly, it has been traditional in the Latin America production of school effectiveness research to associate inaccurately education quality with outputs in standardized tests. Value-added offers a much more accurate, realistic, and nuanced strategy to understand the impact of school practices on learning experiences. Secondly, the paper considers the U.S. experience regarding the shortcomings and misuse of value-added approaches for accountability purposes. Thirdly, the paper meet the international evidence about the importance of teacher but adds underscoring how important is to understand particular practices of teachers at local, school, and classroom level to really unravel teaching practices in a contextualized way where qualitative becomes crucial. Her paper intends to estimate individual value-added measures of a sample of teachers from *São Paulo’s* municipal schools, based on student achievement gains in *Prova São Paulo* (an evaluation system that tests students on reading and math). The purpose was to analyze the potential of value-added to be used for decisions on individual teachers and to provide evidences about characteristics and practices of effective teachers as a whole. As in many Latin America countries, this is a theme yet to be explored in Brazil, since there are only a few and recent longitudinal data that allow those kinds of studies, where Chile is a remarkable exception.

Moriconi rightly underscores that both *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* have led to an increase in initiatives that use teacher effects estimates to guide personnel decisions, but also to an increase of studies discussing the challenges and pitfalls of using the estimates and value-added models to high stakes proposals. *Moriconi’s* attempts to add to such enterprise exploring the following research questions: Do teachers have differential effects on student outcomes? How effective is an individual teacher at producing growth in student achievement, and which teachers are most or least effective? From the second question’s answer we can come out with another question of great interest: What explains teacher effectiveness? The author found that 12% of the teachers in the sample had effects that could be considered distinct from the mean in reading and 14% of the teachers in the sample had effects that could be considered distinct from the mean in math. In addition, it showed that an increase of one standard deviation on teacher effects would mean an increase of between 0.062 and 0.45 standard deviation in students’ scores in reading and of between 0.059 and 0.43 standard deviation in math. Concretely, when analyzing what factors can be associated with teacher effects, master (*especialização*) degree was found to be negative and significantly associated with teacher effects in both reading and math. On the other hand, the frequency of homework assignment and the frequency of use of the Support Workbooks showed positive and significant relation to teacher effects.

Data-use to inform teachers’ instructional decision-making is a common expectation in contemporary schools. The data most often referred to are results of student assessments or samples of student work. *Schratz, Westfall-Greiter and Schwarz* describe an alternative and innovative methodology for researchers or teachers themselves to generate written descriptions of student experiences in learning contexts at school (or elsewhere) that they call “vignettes”. The authors explain and illustrate how the vignettes can be used to stimulate teacher reflection and understanding about the processes of student learning. The vignette methodology is grounded in a phenomenological approach to understanding lived experience. In a vignette, the researcher documents his or her experience of observing and listening to students as they are engaged in activities that are intended to be learning experiences from the teacher perspective; however, the researcher’s observation notes do not presume what learning is nor that students are actually learning in the moments observed. The article draws upon an investigation in Grade 5 classrooms and 24 schools that involved classroom observations using the vignette process, as well as interviews and focus groups with teachers and students. *Schratz, Westfall-Greiter and Schwarz* explain the theoretical foundations for the vignette method of documenting the lived experience of observers and students in learning contexts and the criteria for developing high quality vignettes. They provide examples of written vignettes and illustrate the interpretive process of “vignette reading” as a way for researchers and teachers to engage in reflection and discussion of student learning. They discuss how the production and use of vignettes can be used as texts to promote teacher learning in initial teacher education programs as well as

in the contexts of professional learning community settings in schools. They further suggest that vignette methods and processes could be useful tools in the evaluation of the implementation of innovations in teaching and learning before decisions are made about their institutionalization and diffusion across a school or school system.

In short, readers will find in this collection of articles an overview of recent patterns in educational research. Firstly, a context-sensitivity approach concerns about wider influences shaping school performance. Valued-added methodologies can help us to understand better what it is under school control to achieve and what is still beyond their realistic possibilities (Sebring & Montgomery and Moriconi). Secondly, the papers in this collection show a particular concern about how social relationships impact on school development. It could be seen in the importance of school community as well as trust links within schools actors and between schools (Sebring & Montgomery); or it is observed through the role of power relationships between principals and superintendents as mediating the results of school reforms initiatives (Hubbard & Martinez). Thirdly, it is crucial for school change to continue focusing on teaching practices (Moriconi) and assessment 'for' learning (instead of recent international high-stakes accountability patterns which focus on assessment 'of' learning (Schatz, Westfall-Greiter, & Schwarz). These four articles offer a path to go forward at research, practice, and policy level.

References

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