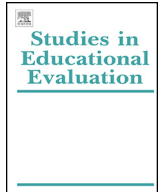




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Promoting quality and equity in socially disadvantaged schools: A group- randomisation study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of the Dynamic Approach to School Improvement (DASI) on promoting *quality* and *equity*. Forty primary schools in socially disadvantaged areas were randomly split into two groups. The control group was supported to develop action plans, whereas the experimental group used DASI. To investigate the impact of DASI on quality, student achievement gains in mathematics were measured. Using multilevel analyses the experimental schools managed to promote student achievement more than schools of the control group. To investigate the impact of DASI on equity, the impact of the socioeconomic status (SES) on student achievement was measured. The effect of SES was reduced only in the experimental schools. Implications for research, policy and practice are drawn.

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1. Introduction

It is expected generally in society that education should achieve high results in different domains of learning and subject areas. This means that the criteria for effectiveness will be at the level to be obtained by individual students, classes, and schools with respect to those objectives (*quality*). However, it is also possible to look at the effectiveness of a school from a different angle, especially through investigating how far schools and teachers managed to reduce the learning differences between students coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds (*equity*). At this point, it should be acknowledged that there are different views of equity which emerge from different philosophical and ideological assumptions about the role of schooling in reducing differences in student learning outcomes with most dominant ones the *meritocratic* and the *egalitarian* views. Those supporting the meritocratic view consider differences in student learning outcomes to differences between students in talents and amount of work dedicated to schooling. However, the meritocratic view is difficult to implement as different hidden mechanisms operate in society which makes it harder for some students to develop their talents than for others, even if students are given access to learning

opportunities (Lim, 2013). On the other hand, the egalitarian view points out that commitment to equity suggests that differences in outcomes of schooling should not be attributable to differences in the socioeconomic background of students. This implies that extra learning opportunities and guidance for socially disadvantaged groups of students are required to assure equal chances for all students. In this paper the different views of equity are not discussed but it is pointed out that one can look at the effectiveness of a school from a different angle, especially through investigating how far schools and teachers managed to reduce the impact of different background factors on student learning outcomes (*equity*). This results in educational objectives and criteria for educational effectiveness which are not related to a specific objective and specific students, but related to different groups of students in relationship to each other. The idea behind this is that education can contribute to social justice and democracy by closing the gap between students with regards to their background, especially their abilities and the socio-cultural status of their family (Lafontaine, Baye, Vieluf, & Monseur, 2015; Sammons, 2010).

However, international evaluation studies reveal that the performance of students from disadvantaged background both within and across countries differs substantially from other students. For example, the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study revealed that across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries approximately 20% of the youth is not equipped with the

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basic skills in mathematics. Disadvantaged students are twice as likely as their advantaged peers to be poor performers, implying that personal or social circumstances may be obstacles to achieving their potentials (Schleicher, 2014). PISA also reports that 40% of the variation in student performance in mathematics is found between schools within a country. This implies that interventions aiming to improve the quality of underperforming schools are needed. Moreover, research shows that interventions supporting primary school students who are at risk have stronger effects than those addressing students at secondary school level (Scheerens & Bosker, 1997; Townsend, 2007). Furthermore, various syntheses of effectiveness programs aiming to improve the attainment of primary students with low basic skills reveal that whole school interventions are more effective (e.g., Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003; Hattie, 2009). In this context, this paper presents the results of a study investigating the extent to which a whole school intervention based on the *Dynamic Approach to School Improvement (DASI)* (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2012) can promote quality and equity in socially disadvantaged schools. Thus, the first part of the paper attempts to illustrate the importance of investigating the school effect on promoting quality and equity. We also refer to the importance of using DASI to undertake interventions at school level in order to promote quality and equity.

2. Measuring quality and equity at school level

Work on equal educational opportunities conducted fifty years ago by Coleman and his colleagues (Coleman et al., 1966) and Jencks and his colleagues (Jencks et al., 1972) argued that student achievement can be predicted mainly by background characteristics of students and especially their Socio-Economic Status (SES) and their intelligence. These studies claimed that after controlling for student background factors, not much variance in student achievement is left for teachers and schools to explain. These findings resulted in a pessimistic view on the contribution that teachers and schools can have in promoting student learning outcomes. In this context, two studies conducted independently in USA (Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker, 1979) and UK (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979) were concerned with examining evidence demonstrating the impact that teachers and schools can have on promoting student learning outcomes. As a consequence, the early school effectiveness research and school improvement projects had been determined, more or less, by the idea of creating effective schools for the urban poor (Edmonds, 1979). In the 1980s, there was quite a lot of criticism against this kind of school improvement and research with its conspicuous sampling biases (Firestone & Herriott, 1982; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Ralph & Fennessey, 1983; Rowan, Bossart, & Dwyer, 1983). As a result, during the last three decades various large scale effectiveness studies were conducted in several countries demonstrating the impact that teachers and schools can have in promoting student learning outcomes (Muijs et al., 2014; Reynolds et al., 2014). Moreover, accountability systems have been developed in several countries which treat the progress made by students as the main criterion for evaluating teachers and schools (Ray, 2006; Sanders & Horn, 1994). Furthermore, the great majority of effectiveness studies conducted in various countries revealed that after controlling for background factors a lot of variation at the school level remains (Chapman, Muijs, Reynolds, Sammons, & Teddlie, 2016; Townsend, 2007) and the variation that is left unexplained is treated as an indicator of the school effect on student learning outcomes (Goldstein, 2003; Thomas, Peng, & Gray, 2007). As a consequence, there is nowadays substantial agreement as to appropriate methods of estimating school differences or effects and the kinds of data required for valid

comparisons to be made in relation to the promoting of quality (Dumay, Coe, & Anumendem, 2014; Goldstein, 1997).

In regard to the impact of schools on equity, some studies revealed that teachers and schools matter most for underprivileged and/or initially low-achieving students (Scheerens & Bosker, 1997). This implies that schools which are effective in terms of the quality dimension may also be effective in reducing the learning differences between students coming from different socio-economic backgrounds. However, almost all effectiveness studies measure school effectiveness in relation to the quality dimension (Sammons, 2010) and thereby a methodology to measure the impact of schools in promoting equity has not yet been clearly developed (Kelly, 2012). Nevertheless, during the last decade an emphasis on investigating equity has gradually been developed. In his paper, equity is seen as related with fairness which implies that personal or socio-economical characteristics such as gender, ethnic origin or family background should not be obstacles to success in education. In this context, OECD developed a specific indicator to measure equity at country level which is concerned with the impact that the SES has on student achievement. It is argued that equitable educational systems are those where SES has a relatively small effect on student learning outcomes. One could therefore evaluate an intervention aiming to promote equity by investigating the extent to which the effect of SES on achievement has been reduced.

3. Establishing a dynamic approach to school improvement: assumptions and features

Most reform policies either at macro or micro level usually try to change the role of various stakeholders and introduce new ideas/concepts and/or theoretical notions and/or a specific theory. For example, the introduction of a new curricula or textbook aims to raise the awareness of teachers about the importance of achieving specific aims and/or using specific teaching approaches such as the use of new learning approaches and/or differentiation of teaching. Also school improvement projects that invite students, parents and teachers to design their own improvement plans are based on the assumption that ownership will result in improving more or less specified or even unspecified change (e.g., the climate of the school). However, a meta-evaluation of school improvement studies revealed that some of these projects failed to improve the quality of education due to the fact that they were based on theories which were not tested in a systematic way (see Creemers & Kyriakides, 2012). Thus, DASI promotes the design of school improvement projects that are based on a theory which has been tested. Specifically, the proposed approach to school improvement has its own theoretical framework which refers to factors of educational effectiveness that need to be considered in introducing a change at school level. By making use of the dynamic model of educational effectiveness (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008), this approach draws attention to the importance of improving school policy for teaching and the school learning environment since these two overarching factors were found to be associated with student achievement gains (Kyriakides, Creemers, Antoniou, & Demetriou, 2010; Hattie, 2009; Scheerens, Seidel, Witziers, Hendriks, & Doornekamp, 2005).

Second, DASI is based on the assumption that student learning should be considered as the ultimate aim of any school improvement effort. Unless learning and learning outcomes are improved, any school improvement effort should not be considered successful no matter how much it may manage to improve any aspect of the climate of the school or any other school factor which is not related with student learning. This is due to the fact that learning is the mission of the school and emphasis should be placed on improving learning outcomes. This assumption implies

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