

Preface

In a set of reviews on the state of the art of educational effectiveness research in the Journal *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* (June 2014), the field is described as “in good shape” (Reynolds et al. 2014, 196). In my own commentary of the reviews this positive message was partly confirmed: there is strong consensus on the set of malleable conditions associated with good student performance. Yet, I thought that some critical comments were warranted as well: for most of the identified and generally supported malleable factors, quantitative meta-analyses show considerable differences in the estimate of average effect sizes, and the progress in the direction of a more model- and theory-driven approach is quite slow (Scheerens 2014). In this book the challenges presented by the cited review studies are taken up by means of more detailed and explicit modelling and an extensive review of the literature that spans four decades of research (Part I), a presentation and review of quantitative meta-analyses (Part II) and further reflection on theoretical foundations as well as analyses of practical application of the empirical results (Part III). The work is based on research carried out over a period of about 10 years as part of a research program at the University of Twente in the Netherlands, led by the author, comprising several meta-analyses, review studies and secondary analyses of international datasets. In the course of synthesizing this work it became clear that the reality that was emerging was not that of a unilateral success story. Despite “positive results” in the sense of support for effective malleability and the straightforward logic of the conceptual models, considerable “dissonance” was noted as well, in the form of strong variation in research results for most key factors, very low effect sizes resulting from our own studies and an influence of “given” background and contextual conditions that was frequently considerably stronger than that of malleable, policy amenable variables. These results prompted a growing interest in the question of why so many plausible malleable variables did not work in so many instances. And this growing preoccupation with “ineffectiveness” was still enforced by experiences with secondary analyses on international datasets. There we found negligible effects for most of the school characteristics in most countries, with only very few exceptions, lack of

change in average performance over time, in most countries, and failure to identify indirect effects of system-level levers, hypothetically mediated by conditions at school level. Such a reading of the international results in question contrasts with the image of strong positive malleability in some reports by the OECD and McKinsey. These observations stimulated the search for theoretical mechanisms, able to explain not just the positive results and effectiveness but also the disappointing results and “ineffectiveness”. When addressing application of the educational effectiveness research findings, the issue of research utilization was encountered as well as the connection between effectiveness research and school improvement. It was noted that recommended approaches for school improvement and systemic reform differ in the degree to which they remain close to the empirical evidence. Some cases that were mentioned appeared to go far beyond the educational research evidence in overstressing the impact of secondary functions in schooling, such as leadership and cooperation between teachers. A case study of policies and bottom-up developments in Dutch education further illustrates the complexities of systemic reform when the ambitions of evidence based work are clashing with strong school autonomy.

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