ICSEI EDITORIAL

System effectiveness and improvement: the importance of theory and context

Over its 30-year history, the field of school effectiveness and improvement has faced challenge, criticism, and controversy. However, the quality of the empirical base has ensured that most trials have been successfully overcome. Now the school effectiveness and improvement field faces a new and pervasive challenge. The international large-scale assessment data, that is, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) are now hugely influential in shaping educational policy around the globe. On the positive side, these international benchmarks have advanced understanding of the factors associated with student outcomes and have caught policy makers’ attention. On the negative side, critics claim a lack of theoretical consideration along with a rather “simplistic ontology” regarding schools, students, and teachers (Caro, Sandoval-Hernández, & Lüdtke, 2014, p. 434).

Another criticism of these international assessments concerns the “fishing for correlations” and the causal inferences that follow a particular simplistic logic (Caro et al., 2014, p. 434). Based on large-scale assessment data, the core implication from many contemporary analyses of the “high performing systems” is that replicating their strategies will naturally lead to better educational outcomes and performance (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010). Although this logic may be seductively straightforward, it completely ignores the complexity of education systems along with the contextual and cultural boundaries in which they operate (Zhao, 2014). In contrast, the school effectiveness and school improvement research base has consistently underlined the importance of context in explaining relative school and system performance. In their work, Hopkins, Harris, and Jackson (1997) identified differential improvement strategies for schools at various stages of development and growth that took account of contextual factors.

Fast-forward to 2015 and context has almost disappeared under the weight of uniformity and standardization. The romanticized and de-contextualized accounts of “high performing” systems have fuelled a global demand for neatly packaged, non-theoretical, empirically fragile improvement solutions. Weak causal attributions and de-contextualized approaches have become part of a discourse that is all about “fixing” faulty or sub-standard education systems or schools.

The challenge for the school effectiveness and improvement field, at this particular moment in time, is two-fold: first, to ensure the theoretical and empirical work is not sidelined and is part of the contemporary discourse about school and system improvement; second, to underline that context is an explanatory factor of effectiveness and improvement, at both the school and system level. This is not to suggest that context simply pre-determines outcomes, as the school effectiveness movement has clearly shown that irrespective of contextual influences, schools can be effective and can improve. Instead, it is to reinforce that by removing all contextual and cultural influences any neat, causal attributions are questionable and any sweeping explanations for system or school improvement are dubious.