

Q: What is the main message of *Fifteen Thousand Hours*?

Mortimore: The main message is a positive one: despite the overwhelming relationships we know exist between school attainment and social class, the individual school can be effective for students of all social groups.

Q: What does the title refer to?

Mortimore: That was our rough calculation of the amount of time an English child spends in compulsory schooling. It seemed a nice way of encapsulating the idea of school influence.

Q: Your study says that some second-

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ary schools are more effective than others. How are the effective schools different?

Mortimore: We found five differences in the behavior of teachers. First, they showed a positive attitude toward learning. Second, they were generally more organized. Third, they stressed rewards rather than punishments. Fourth, they made conditions for students as nice as possible. And finally, they involved students to a greater degree in their own learning and in management of the school.

Q: How did you find this out?

Mortimore: Well, we first looked to see which schools scored highest on those outcomes we considered a reasonable measure of effectiveness, making sure to control for differences in input factors (what students were like when they entered the schools). We

also spent a considerable amount of time in the schools, watching to see how things were done, and comparing practices in effective schools with those in other schools.

Q: You referred to outcomes. What were your measures of effectiveness?

Mortimore: There were four: attendance, behavior in school, delinquency out of school, and learning—measured in our English system by scores on public examinations. In fact, there's a fifth outcome—long-term follow-up of the young people out in the world of work—but the data are still being analyzed on that.

Q: How great were the differences you found among schools?

Mortimore: They varied with the particular outcome, but they were considerable. For instance, we found that some schools had 70 percent

ON SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS: **A Conversation with Peter Mortimore**

In Fifteen Thousand Hours, a team of British researchers reported characteristics of unusually effective London high schools. In this interview with ASCD Executive Editor Ron Brandt, one of the authors explains how educators can use the findings to improve their own schools.



more examination passes than would have been predicted from their intake, while other schools had 60 percent less. Attendance in the fifth year of school varied from 65 percent up to 85 percent, and delinquency among boys varied from 18 percent to 45 percent; that's a fair range of difference!

Q: Teachers and students come and go. How stable were these differences from year to year?

Mortimore: We studied the outcomes for a period of several years, and they did seem to be quite stable, although we need more studies of stability. I'm currently involved in looking at stability of outcomes for all 182 secondary schools in London. Our preliminary results seem to show that some schools consistently do better than would be expected and others consistently do less well.

Q: Is it reasonable to conclude that schools are effective *because* they have high expectations and provide good conditions for students and so on? Do these things *cause* schools to be effective?

Mortimore: Well, "cause" is a big word. We think there is probably a causal influence at work, but as scientists we have to be very careful. Ours was basically a correlational study; it revealed statistical associations. We now need long-term follow-up work to record changes as they take place. Only when we've done that can we talk with confidence about causes. Still, in the discussions we've had with teachers and administrators, it's interesting that they seem to think the factors we've identified are probably causes of different outcomes.

Q: Does the research in *Fifteen Thousand Hours* show that individualized instruction is ineffective?

Mortimore: No, it doesn't address that question directly because we didn't have enough schools operating individualized instruction. In one or two instances, I personally saw very effective individualized instruction and I'd like to follow up on that.

What we do address directly in the book is what I call "mismatch"—for instance, the teaching may have been set up on a group basis and yet the teacher proceeded as if it were indi-

vidualized, which left some students with nothing to do. We found that to be a negative thing. One of the teachers told us that, in her opinion, the secret of group instruction is to address the whole class but to make each student think you are addressing her or him on a personal basis.

Q: *Fifteen Thousand Hours* says the characteristics you've listed aren't independent of one another; they go together. The book talks about a "positive ethos." What does that mean?

Mortimore: Basically I think it means a positive attitude by teachers toward young people and a positive attitude toward learning. By the end of the study we were all convinced we shouldn't be concentrating on particular actions, but on the underlying ethos. Some of those actions take place in some schools but quite different ones take place in others; there are lots of alternatives. What really seems to matter is the ethos that influences the actions.

Q: How does a school develop a positive ethos?

Mortimore: In the book we speculated that it takes *leadership*—strong, positive leadership that manages to capture the enthusiasm of the teachers without being either too democratic or too autocratic. One school we studied was so democratic they had meetings every night and they had to vote on every issue. We picked up a lot of antagonism toward that. On the other hand, we also picked up a lot of antagonism toward principals who ran their schools autocratically and didn't involve the staff in any of the planning of policies. It's obviously difficult, but necessary, to get that middle course—to involve people sufficiently without overburdening them. Leadership is, I think, very important.

Second, it takes high *expectations*—for students' work, for their behavior, and also, of course, for teacher performance. Again it's easy to say but very hard to do.

A third necessity is *consistency*. This is hard, too. How, with a large staff and a pluralistic society, can you get shared values, aims, and treatment of students? But if you can get consistency, it's immensely helpful to students.

A final area we speculate about is *feedback*. I don't think school reports and parents' evenings, traditional ways of providing feedback on pupil performance, are enough. For example, I know of some students who were given—rather late, but for the first time in their careers—realistic feedback which contrasted sharply with the unrealistic but positive comments they'd had before. The challenge for teachers is to somehow combine positive expectations with realistic feedback. Like the other things I've mentioned, it's very hard, but clearly it's what we must try to do.

Q: Do you believe teachers and principals can make their schools more effective just by being told these things?

Mortimore: No, I don't think it's that easy. Changing a school's ethos from negative to positive is extraordinarily difficult, because once you set up a system everything in the school relates to it. For example, student work is never posted on the walls in some schools but in others it is. Some teachers say if work is put up it gets ripped down. In other schools, they put work up and it stays up.

Now, if a teacher, having read our study or heard one of us lecture, were to go back to his or her school and put up work on the wall, chances are it would be ripped down—because the students wouldn't be used to it. It would be a new departure; it would take time for that change to become acceptable.

So it isn't easy to move from the research to improvement. But it can be very valuable for teachers to use the study as the focus for looking at their school collectively and realistically to think of things they want to change. For example, they might decide that work on walls is important, and a group of them would choose to exhibit students' work in this way, but they would have to prepare the students beforehand, and they should expect some failure at first.

Q: Yours was a study of inner-city schools. To what extent do you think the findings apply to schools in other types of communities?

Mortimore: We don't have much data on that, although we have one

corroborative study from small schools in Wales, in a book by David Reynolds that is due out later this year. It's a study of nine schools in mining valleys, very different from London, but his findings are fairly similar to ours. And when I talk to teachers throughout the United Kingdom, they tell me they are concerned with the identical issues.

Q: Yours was a correlational study, not an experimental one, so you could only consider schools as they are. How close are the existing effective schools to what you think schools should be like?

Mortimore: I don't think any of us would have felt confident enough to describe an ideal model; we needed a lot of empirical work first. However, there are many educators in England who are critical of the current British system. If one were talking about ideal education for young people in the second half of the 20th century, many educators would propose models quite different from even the most effective of those 12 schools.

The key, I think, is the examination system. Many of us in England are critical of that system because we think it dominates the curriculum and prevents essential change from taking place.

Q: So if you had used other measures of effectiveness, your results might have been different?

Mortimore: No. I think whatever measures were used, the same schools would have been at the top and bottom of the list. However, I think there is plenty of room for change, even for the most effective.

Q: Based on your group's findings, what can you suggest to teachers and administrators of U.S. schools who want to make their schools more effective?

Mortimore: If they are committed to thoroughly evaluating their own school, then at least they have a basis on which to start. Taking account of the kinds of students they have, they can identify the school's weak areas and begin to plan change. Next year they will have to monitor again, and if they haven't achieved enough change or if the change has had no effect, they can try something

else. That's far better than shrugging their shoulders and blaming the school's failure on the inadequacy of students and their parents.

Q: Then principals and teachers, if they are determined, can make their schools more effective?

Mortimore: Yes. The evidence, both here and in England, is clear: they can, though it will be hard work and they must expect some setbacks. Research cannot tell them exactly

what to do but it can, I hope, provide some general direction. Many principals and teachers are beginning to build on the research finding to develop their own strategies in the search for effectiveness. I believe they will succeed. ■

Reference

Rutter, Michael, and others. *Fifteen Thousand Hours*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979.

Peter Mortimore is featured with Ronald Edmonds of Harvard University, Barak Rosenshine of the University of Illinois, and ASCD Associate Director Kathy Schaub in **Teacher and School Effectiveness**, a staff development videotape released in March by ASCD. Purchase price: \$195 to ASCD members, \$230 to nonmembers; rental \$45. Write for a descriptive leaflet to Publications, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 225 N. Washington St., Alexandria, VA 22314.



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