

Overview

RON BRANDT

From Effectiveness to Excellence

Concluding her triumphant report in our March 1985 issue on Milwaukee's project RISE, Maureen McCormack-Larkin noted that Milwaukee educators "are obviously proud of the gains their students have made," but that their focus on the essential elements of effective schooling has been "only a first step." "Narrowing the educational agenda was a necessary prerequisite in turning their schools around," she wrote, "but now they are eager to accept the challenge of converting their schools into excellent schools" (1985, p. 37).

In the last five years or so, the effectiveness movement has given new confidence and direction to American educators, especially those working with low-income students. Ronald Edmonds' five factors (Edmonds 1979, Brandt 1982) and Barak Rosenshine's six functions (this issue, p. 60) have served as stepping stones out of the morass of disorder and defeat.

When administered sensibly, as in Milwaukee, the emphasis on purpose, a businesslike climate, and high expectations has paid off in higher student achievement. Fundamental as these factors may be, however, they do not define excellence; they only describe the context within which good teaching can take place.

This is not to disparage the value of the effective schools and effective teaching research, but to place them in perspective. Just as aspiring concert pianists must first learn basic fingering, would-be master teachers must be able to present well-organized lessons with clear goals and opportunities for appropriate student practice. Moreover, the effective teaching research has itself been a necessary predecessor to more discriminating inquiry.

Now, however, a new generation of research, much of it conducted by cognitive psychologists, is beginning to capture the finer points of teaching. William Bickel, who arranged for the three articles in this issue written by his colleagues at the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh, explains that cognitive researchers want to know how the human mind acquires knowledge, how the learning process is

shaped within classrooms, and how strategies facilitate the learning of particular subject matter. Like the effective teaching researchers, these scholars often observe teachers, but when they do, they are primarily concerned with the *content* of classroom interaction: what the teacher says, what a student says, how the teacher responds, and why.

What does this research tell us about teaching that is more than "effective"? First, excellent teachers grasp the structure of the discipline they teach. Martin Simon (p. 40) has found that teachers who wish to use discovery learning in mathematics must be able to identify the key concepts they want students to learn and to design activities accordingly.

Equally important, good teachers are tuned in on students' mental functioning. Their purpose is not just to get students to perform a set of skills; it is to get them to understand.

In studying the complex effects of classroom interaction on growing minds, cognitive researchers are asking the right questions. Then, when they have analyzed numerous accounts of what exemplary teachers actually do and say, these researchers are in a position to extrapolate from their findings to devise and test content-specific teaching strategies. The eventual result promises to be a growing stock of research-based strategies other teachers can use to increase the understanding of *their* students.



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