

Student Aspirations: A Critical Dimension in Effective Schools

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The school effectiveness literature has identified a number of factors as characteristic of instructionally effective schools. One characteristic which has not been generally recognized is the level of student aspirations. The term aspirations has been defined in a number of ways. Words such as goals, dreams, ambitions, and drives have all been used interchangeably when discussing student aspirations. It is the author's belief that aspirations are what drive students to be what they will become. As educators, it is our responsibility to provide school environments which will encourage students to do more and be more than they may presently aspire to. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of increasing student aspirations as a component of effective schooling strategies.

A major responsibility of our school system is to help all young people learn. This concern for the development of all individuals is central to the effectiveness of our educational system and it is consistent with the expressed value in the effective schooling literature that *all* students can learn (Edmonds, 1979).

Yet when we take a close look at the reality of schools and schooling, we find that students are too often sorted and tracked. Some are encouraged to excel, while others become alienated, disenchanted and fall behind; and some leave. It is the young people who disconnect while others thrive who have been characterized as having low aspirations.

It is important to recognize that aspirations are multidimensional. Factors directly associated with an individual's aspirations include educational, vocational, and quality of life issues. The word aspiration cannot be simply defined as individual dreams or ambitions. Students' aspirations are derived from a combination of educational goals, vocational endeavors, and perhaps, most importantly, their own sense of self as it relates to what they feel are important elements to success in lifestyles of their choosing.

Students with low aspirations are too often relegated to the fringes of the school environment where there are few choices and few opportunities to achieve. It is not surprising that one perennial challenge facing our school system is the reform of the environment for learning so that more students will benefit.

An effective school is one where concern for learners who are not successfully taking advantage of the school environment can be found. Learning is at the heart of the self-renewing school. It is the role of educators to diagnose, to help solve student learning difficulties and to provide an impetus for ongoing improved, enhanced relationships between schools, communities and students. It is the role of the effective school to create an environment in which high aspirations can flourish.

Adopting a goal of students raising their aspirational level sounds like a demanding challenge because it involves leading students and teachers to reconsider deeply held views, beliefs and habits which have been reinforced by the traditions of communities. There are many educators who perceive students with low aspirations as not having the motivation or the capacity to succeed at school work. Having low aspirations is not synonymous with low ability or low achievement or inherent in any racial or economic group.

There are a number of approaches which can be used to reach students with low aspirations and these approaches can be placed on a continuum of interactions. There are interactions between students and educators, students and students, students and parents, educators and parents. These interactions have one common end, and that is adjusting the educational environment to promote increased learning and insisting that performance in school can be improved by giving students an opportunity to grow in their own environment.

School reform initiatives, the findings of school effectiveness studies, and contemporary understandings of functional organizations all underscore the importance of a positive school atmosphere. It is the author's belief that a positive school climate cannot exist where students do not have high aspirations.

Effective School Research

The early school effectiveness studies tried to identify issues and factors which were quantifiable and easily manipulated by policy directives. Such variables as class size, building costs, and compensatory programs were found to not significantly effect the academic achievement of students. Later school effectiveness research examined the effects of different variables, often using qualitative methodologies. There was much more emphasis on the

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role of process variables in education rather than static factors such as teacher salaries, school budgets, and class size. Research methodologies also shifted from large scale surveys to in-depth observations and interviews in selected schools.

This shift in the research developed support for the notion that student academic performance is strongly affected by the school culture (Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker, 1979). Such cultures are composed of values, norms, and roles existing within the instructional organization of the school. Successful schools are found to have cultures that produce a climate or "ethos" conducive to teaching and learning (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979).

It has not been suggested that there is one "right" school culture. School cultures will vary, in part, as the composition of the staff, the student body, and the environment in which the school exists, vary. Each school building will therefore have its own unique personality (Popkewitz, Tabachnick, & Wehlage, 1982). Nevertheless, academically effective schools are likely to possess similar characteristics, ones that encourage and promote student achievement.

There is little agreement as to the exact characteristics or numbers of characteristics which constitute an effective school. They range from the five identified by Edmonds (1979) to the thirteen identified by Purkey and Smith (1985). There is, however, consensus on a number of clusters associated with effective schools (Clark, Lotto & Astuto, 1984).

- Strong administrative leadership
- A climate of expectation for satisfactory student achievement
- An orderly but not oppressive school climate
- A focus on pupil acquisition of basic school skills
- A system for continuous monitoring of pupil progress, and
- Resources that can be focused on the fundamental learning objectives of the school.

The purpose of this paper is not to dispute the importance of any of these factors, but rather to elaborate and clarify the factors which are clearly associated with the aspirational level of students. The importance of understanding student aspirations appears to be an overlooked variable in the effective schooling formula. Student aspirations is not a component which can be taken for granted. Rather, aspirational levels of students is at the heart of student achievement and positive school climates.

As educators, we are taught to have high expectations of our students. But does it really matter if teacher *expectations* of students are high if student *aspirations* are low? If we believe that teachers influence student learning with the expectations they hold for student performance and for their own teaching performance, we must also believe that students affect one another by their level of achievement and by the behavioral standards and expectations they hold. However, absent from this

proposition and very much at the heart of student expectations is the concept of student aspirations. It becomes apparent that it is difficult to have one without the other. Unfortunately, much of the effective school literature ignores the issue of student aspirations while addressing teacher expectations for students.

It is important to note that research on effective schools began as an effort to repudiate the theory—promulgated by James Coleman, Christopher Jencks, and others—that familial effects outweigh any school effects on learning. With all the research on effective schooling one must ask, Why don't teachers and administrators simply raise their expectations for students? The answer is that many public school educators have uncritically accepted the hypothesis of familial effects, along with its corollary: that teachers cannot be held accountable for students' failure to learn when the students come from poor home environments.

Aspirations must be considered an essential component of the motivation to achieve, operating somewhat like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Student aspirations have always existed, but little research has been conducted regarding the role or the impact the school has in shaping aspirational levels for children. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines aspirations as: 1) a strong desire for achievement and 2) an object of such desire, ambitious goal. Thus, student aspirations can be broadly defined as what drives individuals to *do more* and *be more* than they presently are. Raising student aspirations is, therefore, related to those activities and behaviors that create an environment in which a) positive self-esteem develops, b) awareness of opportunities in economic, educational and personal growth are created, c) encouragement is ongoing, d) choices are made and risks taken, and e) potentials will be realized.

Implications for Research

The school effectiveness literature has been continuously criticized for its lack of practicality. Critics say there is very little information to put your hands on and immediately implement.

Researchers need to look at what goes on in effective schools rather than concentrating on differences between schools. Practitioners need to take the available information and pursue implementation procedures. Clearly, researchers need to act differently and practitioners need to think differently.

What works in raising student aspirations? Can we achieve equity and excellence? How can we deal with students in collective ways when they are so different in as many ways? The questions and variables we study may provide answers to these difficult questions:

1. There is a need to extend our sample. Most effective school research has been done at urban, disadvantaged, and elementary schools. It is time to extend our perspective by looking at rural, small, and affluent schools and all the possible combinations.
2. There is a need to examine diverse outcomes. The measured outcomes must go beyond standardized

test results. We need to assess in such areas as cognitive abilities, social awareness, and concern for civic responsibilities and emotional stability.

3. One must systematically examine factors which may not as yet have been clearly identified in the effective schooling literature. Specifically, I would suggest, we need to explore the variable of student aspirations and its related factors.
4. And lastly, although one may read this as contradicting the other research suggestions, we cannot continually disaggregate schools, it is obvious that the factors which collectively make up schools are interrelated. Therefore, there is a need to look at such variables in their collective effects.

DISCUSSION

The decade of the 80's has been a time when the demand for school improvement and an evolving vision of effective schools have come together in our search for better schools. The necessity and vision are now one, to successfully reach all our children. The goal of this paper has been to identify the need to develop research projects aimed at understanding an additional core factor in effective schools, the aspiration levels of youth.

There is obviously a need for future research around the basic question: What is the relationship between effective schools and student aspirations? Specifically, we need larger conceptual and knowledge bases in the following areas:

- 1) A definition of aspirations which will be to various socio-economic, political, educational, and age groups;
- 2) An understanding of the correlation between levels of expectations and levels of aspirations;
- 3) The role of all school personnel and how they impact student aspirations; and
- 4) The types of staff development necessary to create school climates which promote higher student aspirations.

If one accepts the fact that high aspirations can be vital to students' success, it then becomes essential to understand how this concept fits within the effective school movement. One can see that to prepare students to meet the societal challenges of today, the educational system must allow students to take command of their own lives, encouraging them to make full and ready use of all their potential and capacities.

An effective school is a self-renewing school. It's one that continually monitors its own progress, identifying and solving problems that interfere with the learning of students. Such schools are permeated by a "can do" attitude. This attitude is based on confidence in the community and respect for the individual. Such schools have teachers who believe in all their students (high expectations), who promote self-confidence and thereby raise students' self-esteem and aspirational levels.

It becomes obvious that the school staff views the educational environment as one which promotes increased learning and higher aspirations is more effective than

one that constantly seeks to prove or believes that the problem of low levels of aspirations are a result of deficiencies or weaknesses of individual students. An effective school strives to redesign its environment for learning toward raising the aspirational level of students instead of reifying what exists and insisting that students with low aspirations try to adapt to an environment in which they are uncomfortable and feel inferior.

The issue of student aspirations is of national and international importance. It is a concept which has no geographic or language boundaries. As educators, researchers, and policy makers, it is our responsibility to provide environments in our schools which will encourage students to do more and be more than they presently are. As educational leaders, *our aspiration* should be to understand the dynamics of effective schools. We will be remiss if we omit student aspirations from our effective schooling model.

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