

Organizing and Improving School Environment

Editor

Stelios Orphanos
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**Athens Institute for Education and Research
2012**

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Organizing and Improving School Environment: An Introduction

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We live in an era where education is at the forefront of public discussion and debate. Calls for increased accountability for teachers and schools are becoming more and more common in many countries around the world. Educators and educational systems are coming under extreme societal and political pressures in order to deliver a better educational product, a better prepared working force while (as always) many call for schools to provide the solutions to many societal, economical and political problems.

However, it seems that schools are taking on more responsibilities without necessarily having more resources to do so. The number of responsibilities fulfilled by teachers worldwide has increased dramatically over the last couple of decades. More often than not, these additional responsibilities (or roles) compete for teachers' and schools' time and attention. Teachers are not only expected to effectively and holistically educate children but they are also expected to perform their pedagogic roles more efficiently given that the ongoing global economic crisis has made it extremely difficult for many school systems around the world to acquire more fiscal resources. It's becoming more and more evident that educational systems will have to find more creative, innovative or even "intelligent" ways in accomplishing their goals. Educational systems around the world need to know how to make the best use of their financial resources and how they can get the greatest return on their investments in education.

School systems are widely considered as open systems. The open systems framework is a useful approach to analyze the various ways in which school systems can modify their inputs and their central processes in order to deliver results. The basic inputs for any school are teachers, students, facilities and educational material. This volume is titled "Organizing and Improving School Environment" because it represents an effort to investigate how changes in the way we think of and organize schools' environment might lead to better educational experiences for teachers and students and of course better educational results. In other words, the work featured in this volume tries to present some of the most effective and easily adopted strategies in supporting teachers in their efforts to educate children.

The volume consists of two sections. Part A features research on how to improve teachers via teacher education and professional development or via improving schooling conditions. Teachers are considered to be the single most influential factor in determining student outcomes. A large body of evidence suggests that teachers are the most important factor influencing student outcomes (Goldhaber, 2007; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004; Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). Recent studies suggest that the effects of teaching on student learning are substantial—especially for poor and minority students—and accumulate over time. It is widely believed that improving schools’ environment will improve working conditions for teachers and as a result teachers will be in a better position to identify and cater to students’ needs and ultimately improve the student outcomes valued by society (professional knowledge and skills, beliefs, social behavior etc). Liang’s paper deals with the historical evolution of the teaching profession in the United States over the course of the 20th century. Liang clearly outlines the difficulties in establishing teaching as a profession and elaborates on the kinds of professional knowledge teachers need today. Another key issue presented in the paper is how to formulate in-service teacher training with an emphasis on teacher collaboration. In the current accountability era, it is more important than ever to empower teachers and foster professional collaboration among staff members in order to improve quality of teaching and student learning. Pollack’s paper is focused on school culture and deals with the effect of people’s underlying assumptions on school climate and atmosphere. Organizational culture has been the subject of many studies in different disciplines over the past 30 years and we now have a considerable amount of data showing its importance to organizational outcomes. The author presents an instructional strategy on how to raise awareness about the links between race, teacher expectations and school culture. The paper is timely given the constantly changing demographic character of student populations worldwide. Hunt’s paper focuses on reform initiatives for improving schools in the United States. One of these initiatives is changing and improving leadership preparation. Public demands for more effective schools have placed growing attention on the influence of school leaders (Orr & Orphanos, 2011). A large number of studies have consistently shown that leadership behavior is positively related to various school and student outcomes (Day, Sammons, Hopkins, Leithwood, & Kington, 2008; Leithwood & Day, 2008). As a result, it is expected that the quality of leadership preparation can positively influence leaders’ work and impact on teaching and learning. As Hunt concludes, these initiatives (as stand-alone ideas) fail to adequately address issues of educational quality as promoted by national accountability plans (NCLB). Evrekli, Oren and Inel discuss teachers’ self-efficacy with regard to effectively apply the constructivist approach in creating learning environments for students and identify areas for improvement in pre-service teachers’ training. Their paper shows the necessity for changes in university programs so that teachers are better equipped in preparing effective lessons. Akbas, Cikrikci and Yildirim draw our attention to the difficulties

Turkish math teachers faced in their instruction over the past decade. These problems are clearly relevant not to math teachers in Turkey but to many teachers teaching other subjects in different levels of education. The difficulties broadly fall into two categories: problems originating from students' background and systemic deficiencies. All difficulties mentioned can be addressed via appropriate educational policies. Szecsi's paper examines prospective teachers' cultural, linguistic and pedagogical competencies as evidenced in a trans-cultural project carried out in Hungary and United States. The results of the study show that new teachers can improve their ability to recognize acknowledge different cultures, value minorities and even develop teaching strategies in teaching foreign languages through similar training projects. The final paper in Part A is from Gokce and Erdem who discuss teachers' perceptions about effective schooling in Turkey and provide policy recommendations for improving schooling for students and teachers. Collectively, the papers in Part A identify a number of policy issues that hold promise in better preparing prospective teachers and schooling environment in general.

Part B features research that deals with the central process of schooling which is instruction. More specifically, the papers included in Part B try to identify how to better deliver or assess instruction in a variety of curriculum subjects or learning contexts. The seven papers in Part B share an emphasis on improving students' competences in various curriculum subjects and as a result provide us with a holistic view of student competences that matter for learning. Ronsivalle and Orlando extensively discuss the potential of various models of instructional delivery and present the merits of an "integrated" model of instruction. Spychalska- Kaminska's paper deals with personality development and emphasizes the importance of idolatry. The author argues against the total rejection of idolatry by presenting benefits to young people during the phase of identifying with specific social models that may serve as idols. Avotina's paper focuses on the development of cultural values among young people through the integration of ancient Greece's major works. The paper offers a unique perspective on how ancient works can build cultural and social competence among youth given that the context of the paper is not Greece but Latvia. Lee, Townsend and Stonehouse discuss the benefits of certain substances (omega-3 oils) with regard to students' psychological health and overall cognitive ability. The authors present the results of a New Zealand study that show the importance of these substances to students' learning outcomes. Dagliogl discusses a too often neglected category of students; gifted students. The paper presents characteristics of gifted students and argues about the characteristics and knowledge that teachers need to possess if they want to effectively work with gifted students. It also presents various strategies for identifying giftedness among students and concludes with a discussion on teacher biases in identifying gifted students. Ozer's paper deals with the issue of predicting future students' academic achievement. The author uses the Bender Gestalt test in order to predict future visual-spatial development among first graders. The

results are encouraging about the ability of the test to predict students' readiness for first grade. The final paper in Part C describes a specific intervention in promoting students' social competences. Reis-Jorge and Fetal first analyze the concept of social competence, elaborate on current trends and theoretical orientations about training social competences and proceed in describing the basic aspects of an intervention-program designed in Portugal that aims to improve students' self-confidence, interpersonal communication skills and values.

The authors featured in this volume come from many different countries and school settings and their papers give us an excellent opportunity to broaden our perspectives on teaching and learning. The most important contribution of this volume is the identification of educational policies that have the potential to improve schools' environment and enhance students' educational experiences. This knowledge is undoubtedly timely and extremely useful.

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