How Can Schools Deliver Quality Education to the Poor?

Summary of "Challenges Faced by Schools in Poor Communities" (Chile), by Dagmar Raczynski and Gonzalo Muñoz, in Santiago Cueto (ed.) 2006. Education and Equity Gaps in Latin America (in Spanish, Vol. II). PREAL – Education Research Fund.

How can schools help poor children reach high levels of learning? A study published in PREAL's recent book, Education and Equity Gaps in Latin America, analyzes "effective" schools in poor communities in Chile, and finds that they share five factors that are under their control and are effective when combined and implemented across the entire organizational structure—from principal to classroom:

School management focuses on improving learning. Effective schools have a well-defined institutional project that outlines clear goals and priorities designed to raise student learning. They periodically update, monitor, and evaluate these goals. Principals concentrate on achieving these goals and on making efficient use of the human and material resources available to them. Effective schools also share a strong sense of professionalism and pedagogical rigor. They maintain discipline without stifling learning. They train students to excel academically.

Quality instruction complements and informs school management. Teachers support each other's work. Principals direct the work of teachers in the classroom and provide strong pedagogical and technical support. They emphasize: 1) learning that is relevant and significant; 2) highly planned and structured learning situations; 3) methods and resources tailored to students' needs; 4) constant student supervision and feedback; 5) making efficient use of time; 6) promoting rigorous and consistent practices; 7) fostering good student-teacher relations; and 8) using formative learning materials.

Schools have a "symbolic capital" and they nurture it. Effective schools have a "positive school culture" that contributes to their good performance. This culture is grounded in a strong sense of identity and a genuine commitment to the school by teachers and students. Staff understand that this symbolic capital must be nurtured, and strive to maintain it. They also promote an organizational environment that facilitates performance, including good internal communication and a high level of trust.

Schools believe in their students and have high expectations for them. Principals and teachers do not believe that their students' socio-economic status determines their achievement. They believe that students have great potential, but that their opportunities to learn are often limited. Therefore, they try to promote this potential by all possible means. They believe it is possible to deliver quality education in spite of the contexts in which they work. Teachers understand the financial limitations of their students and the poor cultural capital of their families. Yet they believe that they can make a difference and that their students can overcome these constraints.

Schools have a clear vision of the role families should play at school. Effective schools in poor areas take four different approaches to parental participation. Some seek to protect students from influences that may hinder their learning process and provide a limited space for parental participation. Others engage parents as partners in the learning process by giving them regular information about how their children are performing and what they can do to help. Yet other schools collect contributions from parents to cover costs of maintenance and infrastructure. Finally, some inform parents regularly about the schools objectives, activities, and results. Most effective schools promote parental participation in school-related activities, seeking deliberately to construct an alliance.

You can access the full book (in Spanish) at:
http://www.preal.org/Biblioteca.asp?Id_Carpeta=70&Camino=63|Preal%20Publicaciones/70|Libros

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