

*...And then the
whining school-boy,
With his satchel, and
shining morning face,
Creeping like a snail,
unwillingly to school.*

William Shakespeare,
As You Like It

THE CLASSROOM

MEANS AND CONSEQUENCES

Although it's been nearly 400 years since Shakespeare wrote these lines, the attitudes of today's children toward school haven't changed much.

In fact, neither has school itself. If you could walk into your great grandmother's fifth-grade classroom, you would find neat rows of wooden chairs behind small desks, a larger desk at the front of the room, a blackboard, a stack of well-worn books on a shelf against the wall, and a teacher talking or monitoring student work—much the same scene as you would see in many of today's classrooms. As society evolves from generation to generation, the core of classroom activity has remained remarkably unchanged.¹

There have been many attempts to examine and measure the effect of what happens in classrooms, but few concrete answers. Do schools make a difference? What about textbooks, technology, and other tools of education? If we want to improve students' classroom experiences, where do we begin?

The Consequences: What Do Students Learn in the Classroom?

In 1968, Robert Dreeben suggested that what happens to children in school shapes what they learn, above and beyond the explicit lessons taught. "If schooling forms the linkage between the family life of children and the public life of adults," Dreeben wrote, "it must provide experiences conducive to learning the principles of conduct and patterns of behavior appropriate to adulthood."² The ways in which schools choose to organize, present, and execute teaching and the environment in which teaching is done strongly shape and limit what students learn.

Another obvious purpose of schools is to increase knowledge and skill. People with more education have more knowledge than those without.³ Moreover, people with more schooling in youth receive tend to receive more training as adults.⁴ The consequences of schooling differ with each student, each teacher, and each school, but adults carry the knowledge they learned in school for decades. Not only do they remember facts and information, throughout their lives they use learned skills to acquire new knowledge and information.⁵

The Means: How Are the Consequences Achieved?

To improve the results of today's schools, we need to examine what they are doing to produce these results:

- How are students being taught? (see the Learning Tasks fact sheet)
- What is being asked of them in class? (see the Classwork fact sheet)
- What is being asked of them outside of class? (see the Homework fact sheet)
- What tools are being used and are they being used effectively? (see the Materials and Technology fact sheet)
- How are lessons planned and developed? (see the Lesson Plans fact sheet)

The Future: Where Do We Go From Here?

The one-room schoolhouse has grown into a self-contained campus with its own library, gymnasium, playground, computer lab, and media center. Textbooks have been rewritten over and over again. The abacus gave way to the calculator, which in turn is giving way to the personal computer. The settings are bigger and better, the tools have more bells and whistles, but life in Ohio's classrooms appears to remain much the same.

To affect change in education, our focus, like the student's, needs to be directed to the front of the classroom. The tools and technology change constantly, but books, calculators, and computers alone do little to alter our students' education. Subject matter also changes and evolves without affecting the rate of student learning. The factor that historically has not changed much is *how* we teach.

If we want attitudes toward school to move beyond that of Shakespeare's whining schoolboy, the classroom must become a place to which students will walk, if not run. New books won't make that happen. Nor will computers, new buildings, or athletic facilities. New ways of teaching that engage student *and* teacher just might.

The power to find out rests in the hands of teachers.

Endnotes

1. L. Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1880-1990*, Teachers College Press, New York, NY, 1993. Although classrooms have not changed much, schools have. They are now much larger, more clearly age-graded, better equipped, and provide many more nonacademic services.
2. R. Dreeben, *On What Is Learned in School*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA, 1968.
3. H. Hyman, C. Wright, and J. Reed, *The Enduring Effects of Education*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1975. Also see M. Rutter, B. Maughan, P. Mortimore, and J. Ousten, *Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary Schools and their Effects on Children*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1979.
4. Education combines with other influences to make adult learning least common among those who most need it. See Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators, 1998*, Paris, 1999.
5. Hyman, Wright, and Reed.



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