Response to Slavin: Improving Teacher Decisions

Madeline Hunter

I heartily commend Robert Slavin for his endeavors to take a research-based analytic look at what can make a difference in education. I also appreciate the time he has spent becoming familiar with our teacher decision-making model since he wrote "The Hunterization of American Schools," where he characterized it as "rigid and mechanistic." Now he correctly states that the model is based on research that is "well established either in laboratory research or correlational research or both." before he claims the evidence shows it "won't work in actual practice." Let's examine that evidence.

- The Napa Project, given its flaws, presented hard data that test scores escalated when teachers were applying what they had learned. What the project really validated was that newly learned professional skills do not maintain themselves without encouragement and refinement from coaching. In addition, the teaching "skills" were used only for reading and math; therefore the teachers did not perceive them as generic elements in every teaching decision regardless of content or teaching mode. I criticized the project for the omission of the transfer theory that is central to the model.
- Manatt reports positive results with the SIM Project. An associate and I were active in establishing the integrity of content and the certification of its transfer from information to knowledge to judgment to wisdom, for both teachers and administrators. Without judgment and wisdom there is a danger of teachers' becoming robots.
- Although I have been involved in some workshops in West Orange, New Jersey, I cannot attest to the integrity of use of the model. I have serious questions about the general rigidity and "assembly line procedure" of some of the New Jersey Academy's work.
- In terms of the South Carolina study, the researchers state, "The unfortunate truth is that higher-level coaching skills are crucial to teacher improvement." Those skills were missing in many of the coaches. This condition also prevailed in the third year of the Napa Project. The amazing result in both projects was that teachers' attitudes were very positive.

I have cautioned educators in South Carolina against both the mass production of courses and the use of teachers with little or no certification of competence or content integrity. There I also cautioned the state superintendent against rigidity, lack of decision-making skills, and the adoption of a checklist. This fall I will be working with trainers in South Carolina and Arkansas to build correction into the "assembly line" aspects that unfortunately have developed.

Slavin ignores the original validation of the model (Project Linkage) conducted by an independent investigator, Rodney Skagar, which substantiated impressive gains by students in an inner-city Los Angeles school where the integrity of the model was certified. Also, how does he explain the 20-year escalation of acceptance all over the world? Surely educators are not that gullible—they must be seeing results.

There is no aerodynamic research available to support, and there is much to refute, a bumblebee's flying. But the bee flies! If practitioners really said, "I'm not going to use that until I've seen good experimental evidence for it," our classrooms would be immobilized. What research does Slavin believe is supporting current practice?

The Hunter model is an effort to change teaching decisions, many of which are based on tradition, folklore, and fantasy, to theory-based judgments and wisdom. Only by so changing can we move classroom teaching into behaviors that more closely approximate the success of tutoring, something we'll never be able to finance and which, with expert teaching, will seldom be needed.

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of the arguments among researchers about what constitutes adequate evidence. If, for example, you told practitioners clearly that much of the evidence on mastery learning that Herb Walberg (1984) summarized in his synthesis was taken from studies of one week's duration, in which the corrective instruction, which the control group did not receive, was given in addition to regular class time, they would know immediately that such craziness had no bearing on what they do on a day-to-day basis. Because we don't have well recognized standards for what constitutes an adequate evaluation, Walberg took the approach of taking the studies that had "mastery learning" in the title, putting them all together, and reporting a number for them.

Your advice to practitioners then is to look more carefully at the data.

Yes. Before you accept the next program that comes down the pike, demand experimental-control comparisons in real schools over realistic periods of time with suitable measures of effectiveness.

You're saying the evidence is out there?

Yes. And there'll be a lot more—if people start demanding it.

References


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