

A US educationist claims to have the answer to failing schools – and it lies in literacy



Hilary Wilce talks to Robert Slavin and visits a school that's putting his ideas into practice.

Schools in Britain are going nowhere fast. This week the Government announced that hundreds of secondary schools would have to close if they didn't improve their GCSE results. One in five pupils still starts at secondary school with poor basic skills, and last month Ofsted announced that standards had "stalled".

The education watchdog now plans to give failing schools more inspections, but a top US educationist believes that could be barking up the wrong tree. He says we know perfectly well how to fix schools. We just don't choose to do it. Instead, we pass over all the things that have been shown to work in favour of random hunches, short-lived fashions and empty political posturings.

Robert Slavin is a leading educational psychologist who has arrived in the UK to head up the newly formed Institute for Effective Education at York University. He directs a similar centre at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, and is famous for a ground-breaking school reform programme that now runs in 1,200 schools in the US.

In his new job, Slavin plans to direct attention to what works in education, and persuade schools to implement it. He is deeply frustrated by how no school system in the world is yet rooted in policies based on hard evidence.

"Our problem isn't a lack of knowledge about how children learn, or what effective teaching methods are," he says. "Our problem is a lack of knowledge about how to help teachers apply research-proven methods every day."

A group of Michigan hospitals then also used the checklists, and cut their infection rates by 66 per cent, saving 1,500 lives and nearly £90m in just a year and a half. What education needs, Slavin believes, is more proper hand-washing. "Research tells us a lot about effective education. Yet until those well-established principles are formed into detailed and replicable programmes, and evaluated in comparison with traditional methods, we're unlikely to make systematic, broad-scale progress."

Slavin's own school reform package is exactly such a programme. Success for All promotes early educational success for children, particularly those from deprived backgrounds, by concentrating on basic literacy. It was started in 1987 in the US, and 10 years later arrived in the UK, where it was tried out in Nottingham, and where some pupils quickly made a year's progress in one term. Now it is used in 90 schools in this country, all in deprived areas, and between 2004 and 2007 the pupils in those schools made almost three times more progress in reading at Key Stage 2 than pupils in other schools in England.

Success for All uses phonics, setting, regular assessment and paired learning to ensure that all children get a good start in school and no one is left behind (see box), and more might have been heard about it here except that a sudden enthusiasm for one of its key elements – phonics – swept the board in our literacy debate. Interestingly, Ruth Miskin, the former primary school head who spearheaded the drive for phonics, once worked for Success for All before leaving to develop her own materials for schools.

Some critics argue that the Success for All approach is too prescriptive. They say no single approach suits all children, and a programme that visibly groups young children by ability is likely to make some children feel like losers before they start.

Slavin simply points to the evidence. Controlled experiments in the US have proved the effectiveness of Success for All, while the studies of the programme as it spreads in the UK, and in other countries such as Canada, Mexico and Australia, are showing similarly positive results.

"At present, most important educational decisions are made on the basis of marketing, word of mouth, tradition and politics, which then leads to the famous pendulum of educational reform, in which new ideas appear and become widely used and only then are evaluated. By the time the evaluation evidence is in, educators and policy makers have already given up on the new idea, and have rushed off on the latest new idea."

Instead, he says, we need more proven educational programmes, more rigorous and impartial reviews of educational research, and for the Government to provide incentives for schools to take up programmes that have been shown to work. The consequences of this would be far-reaching. "If government policies began to favour programmes with strong evidence, developers including publishers, software producers, university researchers and entrepreneurs of all kinds would have an incentive to engage in serious development and evaluation efforts. And seeing the immediate impact of research and development, policy makers might provide greater funding for these activities."

The Institute of Effective Education plans to develop, evaluate and disseminate effective programmes, which, says Slavin, are thin on the ground in the UK so far. Researchers are trying out cooperative mathematics learning in primary schools and a programme for gifted and talented students. They are also surveying existing research on the participation of minority ethnic students in post-16 education, and on primary reading programmes.

The difference between it and other university education departments is that it doesn't train teachers, it is focusing, instead, on high-quality, randomised evaluations, and it intends to bang the drum for evidence-based progress.

Estelle Morris, the former education secretary, is its chair and calls it "a visionary concept to create an international, independent resource to produce really effective education for all young people. The biggest challenge facing us is to break the persistent link between poverty and under-achievement."

Slavin is in no doubt that sticking to the evidence could bring educational reforms "benefiting hundreds and thousands of children".

But he is realistic about how quickly this will happen. After all, he points out, it took 19th-century surgeons decades to adopt the new-fangled idea of washing their hands before operations, and even today doctors hate the "stupid little checklist" which reminds them how to wash their hands.

'The reason we use it, is because it accelerates learning'

St Stephen's Church of England Primary School, near the Oval cricket ground in south London, started using Robert Slavin's Success for All programme last year and is already seeing pupils do better. Head teacher Louise Salewski introduced the programme for the youngest pupils after taking over the 200-pupil primary, where many pupils come from disadvantaged backgrounds and have English as their second language.

The programme sorts children according to their reading levels, and gets them to work in pairs. They are assessed every six weeks and moved according to their progress, so they are always working from books that are right for where they are. The sessions take 90 minutes every morning.

Children listen to what their partners read out and then restate it. Fernanda, seven, and Carolina, six, are sitting together even though Fernanda is in Year Three and Carolina is in Year 2. Fernanda reads: "Scott puts his hand in the pond. 'Tanya get a stick!' says Scott." "It's about Scott puts his hand in a pond," says Carolina. "Also," says Jeffrey, six, explaining more about the partnership arrangements, "if they get stuck you have to help them."

In a next-door class, a lively paired maths session is under way. The school is helping to trial Power Math, for the Institute of Effective Education at York University, a maths programme that uses the same kind of co-operative learning techniques as Success for All.

Year Five teacher Louise Granger is enthusiastic. "It gets them talking about maths. If one child has to explain how they got their answer, it puts into words how they solved the problem." Jennifer, 10, agrees. "If you share ideas it's better than having just one brain."

In another room, three Year One pupils and a Year Six pupil are going over a story they have read. Children are being encouraged to talk to their partners as they try to remember what happened in it. The older boy, newly arrived in England, is soaking up the language at the right, basic level for his current ability, but will soon move on.

"The reason we use it, is because it accelerates learning," says Salewski. "If you are teaching something to someone else, you have to have understood it first. And it develops their language.

"It also gives them life skills. They are going to have to get on with all sorts of people, so this is good."

Salewski needs plenty of rooms and spaces for the different groups to work. And teachers and teaching assistants need support and training. "But they get to know more kids by doing it, which they really like."

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