

PREFACE

My purposes in writing this book were to describe how students learn, and to explain how family, classroom, and school practices can help them learn more. I also wanted to describe the research methods and evidence for the findings and to refer readers to further research and practical information.

This book derives primarily from behavioral psychology, which emphasizes objective observation and measurement of desired behaviors (or outcomes), and how changes in organization, policies, and practices affect them. The research described here explores how teachers, parents, and others affect student learning. As the term implies, behavioral research usually puts little emphasis on self-reports about internal states such as self-esteem because they cannot be objectively measured or observed.

The evidence in this book is largely restricted to studies of learning outcomes, particularly achievement tests. When well designed and constructed, such tests are objective and reliable. As documented in subsequent chapters, citizens, legislators, parents, and students themselves widely support achievement measurement.

A secondary source of evidence in this book is economics, which shares with behavioral psychology the study of observable and measurable causes and desirable effects. Economists working in K–12 education have often defined learning as the desired effect, making their findings relevant to my purposes.

Economic research that challenges assumptions about causal

effects can be particularly valuable. As described in this book, for example, economists' studies of teacher credentials indicate that education and experience have surprisingly little or no effect on student learning. This negative finding is useful because it suggests that the usual teacher credentialing and compensation show little promise to improve learning. Economists have also carried out rigorous studies of school choice that suggest that consumer choice works well in schools, as it does in markets and other social enterprises. Because of such insights from economists, I have freely drawn on their research as well as that in my own field of psychology.

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