

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research Supporting *The Basic School*

The four priorities discussed in the previous section were certainly not major new findings; instead, Boyer used them to build his framework for how an elementary school should look. The areas of these priorities have been addressed by many researchers, and Boyer used this research to substantiate his findings. Indeed, Boyer's notion of tying his research findings into school reform is based on the work of many researchers over the past twenty years who have done numerous studies in an attempt to determine the best way to go about educating students.

As part of his report, Boyer provides details of other research data he used in arriving at his conclusions. Some of these research reports include the International Schooling Foundation study of primary school education (1994), the National Survey of Kindergarten Teachers regarding school readiness (1991), the National Survey of Elementary School Principals about general practices (1990), the Survey of Fifth- and Eighth-Grade Students regarding elements of school environment (1988), the Survey on School Reform presented to a sample of public school teachers (1988), and the National Survey of Public School Teachers regarding a wide range of topics (1987). Details of the results of these studies are available for further study.

Looking beyond the research findings published specifically by Boyer and his network, one may also find another broader area of research associated with the each of the four priorities of the Basic Schools.

The priority of school as community has been researched extensively over the past few

years. The importance of involving the community in reforming schools is detailed in an article by Ernesto Cortes, Jr. (1996), in which he says that educators are beginning to realize that "...without the support and engagement of the parents and community leaders at the grass-roots level, any attempts at improving the public schools will ultimately be ineffective" (p. 26). The Basic School research certainly substantiates that belief with its strong emphasis on community involvement. Another article in New Schools, New Communities (1996) parallels very closely the Basic School findings by suggesting six types of involvement that promote partnerships between school and community. Those types include parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community (Epstein, 1996). Further, reading the works of authors such as Barth (1990), McCaleb (1994), Sarason (1994), along with others has given me a notion of the ample research available on the topic of school and community.

The curriculum priority is also one that has a wealth of research associated with it. Boyer's findings about the need for the development of some core commonalities in which to group the many pieces of curriculum are supported by researchers such as Hirsch (1987) who promotes the belief that all students should leave school having learned certain core pieces of knowledge. Gardner (1983) believes that the curriculum should be structured so that students with multiple intelligences can have access to those parts of the curriculum that is their strength. All of the research on integrated language arts curriculum and teaching reading and writing across the curriculum also support this coherent curriculum. A recent commentary (Davis, 1997) by the editor of the Journal of Curriculum and Supervision, stresses the belief that an integrated curriculum, similar to the coherent one Boyer suggests, is ultimately the best approach because it "...emphasizes, fundamentally, pupils' development of personal meanings through the use of

substantial, rich context" (p. 97).

School climate has, likewise, been the focus of a great deal of research. The Effective Schools research of Lezotte (1991) and Brookover, et al. (1982) appears to be some of the earliest discussion of the effect of a school's atmosphere or climate on student achievement. Since that time, many researchers such as Goodlad (1983), Slavin (1990), Darling-Hammond (1997), and Purkey (1988) have delved into the importance of school climate. Purkey and Novak's description of invitational education (1988) is very similar to the beliefs Boyer presents in his Basic Schools research. A review of literature on school climate by Peterson (1997) provides a remarkable resource of research in this area.

Finally, the interest in research on character education appears to be growing in recent years. Duncan (1997) believes that this resurgence of interest in students' moral development is the result of current societal events. She specifically suggests that the "...much documented loss of faith in public and common understandings of goodness and right acts, in light of assassinations, political betrayals, and cultural dissolution may provide a rationale for revisiting old strategies" (p. 119). She also senses that "Americans may be beginning to feel the absence of community values and a certain kind of isolation brought about by living in a high tech society" (p. 119). Another researcher, Lickona (1996), presents a list of eleven principles of character education that he believes schools can use as guides in developing their character education programs. These guides could easily be used in conjunction with Boyer's findings to implement the character education priority in a school.

All four of the Basic School priorities can be grounded in the research of Boyer's team as well as the findings of other researchers over the years. All of this information, combined with the

plethora of school reform research, will be useful to a school interested in becoming a Basic School.

Research Since the Publication of *The Basic School*

In addition to the original report on the Basic School research, a number of articles have been published regarding the status of individual schools participating in the Basic School network. Some of those articles are highlighted below.

Allen Raymond, editor and publisher of Teaching K-8, wrote a series of three commentaries over three successive months in the journal regarding the Basic School research (1996). In January, he began with a brief statement of his excitement about Basic Schools and how he felt his readers would be excited, too. He continued in the February issue with the Basic School theme, but this time described his sadness upon hearing of Boyer's death and wrote a tribute to him and his contributions to the field of education. He closed that commentary with a quotation from Samuel Sava, executive director of NAESP, who said, "I believe there could be no greater tribute to his memory than for educators to translate his Basic School concepts into classroom reality" (p. 4).

In addition to these commentaries, numerous articles have appeared in Teaching K-8 detailing the successes of Basic Schools. First, in January, 1996, Raymond highlights David Cox Road School in North Carolina. He describes how this one school has implemented the research, with specific discussion of their work in developing their curriculum around the core commonalities suggested by Boyer. Then, in May, 1996, Raymond presents an article describing the work of Principal Lillian Brinkley and her staff at a school in Norfolk, Virginia, embracing the Basic School tenets. Specifically, the author discusses the priority of school climate and how this

inner-city school has been transformed into a warm, inviting place for students and community members.

An article in the September, 1996, issue of the same journal describes the turnaround Clinton Kelly School in Portland, Oregon, made after implementing the Basic School framework. The school found that test scores improved, parents were more involved, and the school became more innovative. A similar story of success is provided in the February, 1997, issue about a Basic School in downtown Minneapolis. Housed in a twelve-story office building, Downtown Open School began seven years ago as a convenient, innovative way to educate the children of people who worked in the downtown area. The article goes on to discuss how the Basic School framework enabled the school to become even more innovative.

The story of a small parochial school in Somerville, Massachusetts, and its involvement with Basic Schools is highlighted in the April, 1997, issue of Teaching K-8. The school's particular involvement relates to the school as community and coherent curriculum priorities. Still another article in the September, 1997, issue describes a Basic School in Milford, Delaware. Benjamin Banneker Elementary School was, like the other schools mentioned in the preceding articles, one of the original network schools. The involvement of parents is a strength of this school, with the highlight of last year being the turn-out of 500 parents and friends to a Family Reading Night.

A K-5 school on a Native American reservation is the focus of an article in the April, 1998, issue of Teaching K-8. Located in South Dakota, the school has found great success in blending the eight core commonalities of the Basic School with their heritage and culture. Finally, the emphasis on the character priority is the focus of a September, 1998, article in the same

journal. Featuring Prairie Star Elementary School in Leawood, Kansas, the author describes how the school has developed an effective program on character development.

Two articles have also been published in Instructor journal. The first, entitled “Common Sense Wins Out in School Reform,” (September, 1995) is an interview with Boyer on his concept of Basic Schools. The interview addresses issues such as the essence of Basic Schools and the procedures he followed in doing the research, with particular emphasis on the notion of curriculum with coherence. Boyer comments in this article that he believes, "It's time to stop pretending there's some magic innovation we have yet to discover and start concentrating on what good teachers already know and do" (p. 54). A second article, written by Meg A. Bozzone and detailing the role of school climate, particularly in building staff camaraderie, appeared in the January/February, 1996, issue. The article also lists seven very practical suggestions for building community.

In an article in Principal magazine (January, 1994), Boyer offers an overview of his research to elementary principals. He emphasizes that the Basic School research is different from other reforms because it focuses on the first years of schooling. In another article in Principal (September, 1995), Boyer devotes his attention to the commitment to character priority and shares how school communities can come to consensus on developing some basic virtues that can be taught. The same journal highlights the Basic School curriculum tenets in November, 1998. Stressing the coherence that occurs in the instructional program of a Basic School, the article points out the effectiveness of using the framework of the eight core commonalities.

Finally, three other articles highlighting the Basic School research have appeared in educational journals. "How Does Your School Measure Up?" (Thuman and Zaidel) takes the

reader back to David Cox Road School in North Carolina where the authors discuss how the Basic School research can provide a framework for school improvement. In America's Agenda, Thomas Toch (1995) presents an interview he had with Boyer regarding school reform. Boyer reflects on past reform movements and talks more globally about the directions education should be moving, rather than focusing on the Basic Schools research. In the March, 1998, issue of Educational Leadership, Mary Ellen Bafumo, director of the Basic School network, shows how the core commonalities help "...children in Basic Schools see the relevance of traditional disciplines to their daily lives" (p. 67).

Research articles about the Basic School continue to appear in professional journals. (A regularly updated list of these articles can be found on the Basic School Network home page at <http://www.jmu.edu/basicsschool/>.) The editors of Teaching Pre K-8 have devoted at least three issues per year to the Basic School over the past three years. These articles, along with recent articles from Principal, the journal of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and Educational Leadership, the journal of the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, show the growing interest in the Basic School philosophy. Since these are the types of research journals most often read by practitioners, these articles are the ones that are likely to be passed among teachers and administrators in buildings. The sharing of experiences presented in these articles is sure to increase the number of schools implementing Boyer's ideas, and, therefore, will continue to expand the existing field of research on the Basic School.