Evaluation is a central concern in education policy and education research today. The interest in it is not new. Education systems are very much concerned by the ‘demand’ for assessment, which for many years focused on the activity of pupils (their learning) and, to a lesser extent, that of teachers (their teaching skills). However, for some twenty years now the field has been evolving in two ways: on the one hand, evaluation has moved beyond school circles to become a front-line political issue; and on the other, it has been extended from pupils and teachers—let us say, people taken individually—to cover schools, systems and training policies.

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The institutional effect

With regard to schools, the actual concept of an 'institutional effect' and its existence were not at first recognized. At the end of the 1960s, James Coleman \(^1\) and Christopher Jencks \(^2\) questioned whether it was possible to alter the distribution of academic performance by acting on school-specific variables, such as class size, teaching hours, teachers' qualifications and the organization of the school. According to Jencks: 'Differences between schools have rather trivial long-term effects, and [...] eliminating differences between schools would do almost nothing to make adults more equal. Even eliminating differences in the amount of schooling people get would do relatively little to make adults more equal'. \(^3\) These conclusions, which minimized the impact of differences between schools on performance, were not accepted unanimously and were the starting point for a long series of studies which opened up the 'black box' of the school. Researchers went into schools not to assess pupils, but to see what really went on inside, to observe the way in which the school functioned and to discover factors which did influence pupil attainment. This entry into the 'black box' enabled a number of variables to be pinpointed which can be said to have a definite and positive effect on learning.

The study by Michèle Rutter and her fellow researchers, B. Morgan, P. Mortimer and G. Houston, on the effects of secondary schools in England, \(^4\) which was among the critical works produced in reaction to the work of Coleman and Jencks, was an important step forward and marked a necessary shift in the history of school evaluation. The British researchers demonstrated that the effects of schools on pupil attainment are far from negligible. In so doing they opened up a new field of study, generating a whole flurry of research throughout the 1980s, notably on 'school quality and development' \(^5\) and effective schools. OECD's International School Improvement Project (ISIP) \(^6\) was part of the new trend and was to contribute significantly to its development.

Editorial series on best school practice are one of the unexpected by-products of these studies on the quality and effectiveness of schools. They were produced in order to 'spread the good news', that is, to inform practitioners of solutions that, on the basis of research findings, could be said to improve education. The explanatory brochure *What works* \(^7\) was one of the very first examples. The idea was taken up again a few years later by CERI, the OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, which in the 1990s started to publish reports in a series entitled 'Innovations that work'. At the end of the 1990s, the International Bureau of Education (IBE) carried on this work by publishing its series 'Educational practices' in collaboration with the International Academy of Education.

These thirty years of research into schools have resulted in a considerable mass of data and analyses which have focused attention on the functioning of schools by providing information that has itself led to changes in how the results of teaching and the ways in which pupils learn are interpreted. As Ballion summed it up:

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