

# THE TRIPOD PROJECT FRAMEWORK

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JUNE 5, 2008

The Tripod Project for School Improvement is a national consortium of schools and districts with a shared interest in raising achievement for all students, while narrowing gaps among students from different racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds. The Tripod Project is supported and operated as a partnership between Cambridge Education and Dr. Ronald F. Ferguson, Tripod Project Founder. Cambridge Education is an organization that, among its other services, coordinates consulting services for participating Tripod Project school districts. Participating schools receive reports and school improvement services from Cambridge Education, and the lessons we learn from analysis of Tripod data, as researchers, are meant to be shared throughout the research and practice communities.

The Tripod Project was created in response to initial research findings based on a survey of 40,000 students in schools of the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN), including the following:

- **Encouragement:** Black and Latino 7th-11th graders identified teacher encouragement much more often than teacher demands, when asked *why* they worked hard *when* they worked hard.
- **Understanding:** Half of Black and Latino 7th-11th graders reported they completely understood half or less of their teachers' lessons and half or less of what they read for school.
- **Effort and Skill:** No difference in average reported time on homework among black, white and Latino students, but whites reported higher homework completion rates.

In its current form, the Tripod Project is a national consortium of schools and districts with the following in common:

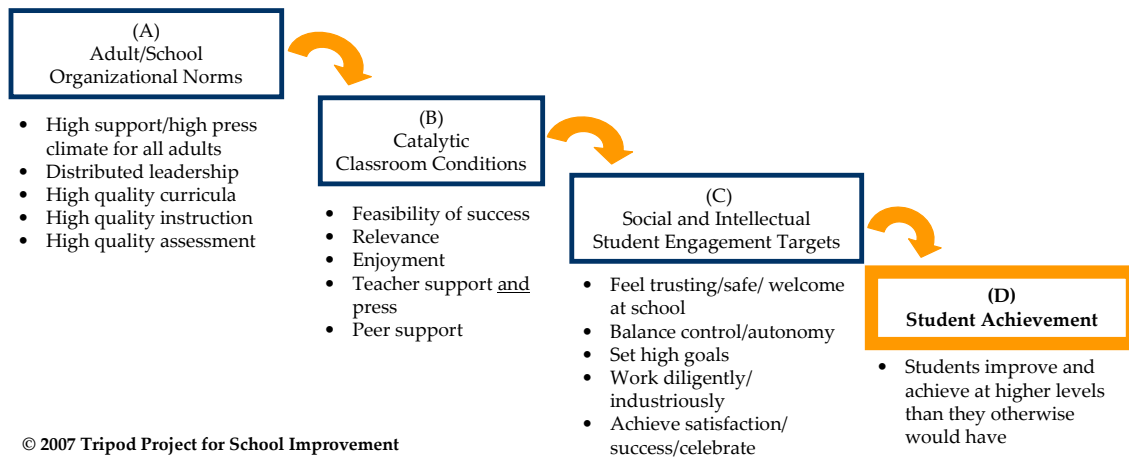
- Focus on raising achievement for all students while closing gaps
- Committed to strengthening all three legs of the Instructional Tripod – Content, Pedagogy, and Relationships (note, “relevance” and “rigor” are aspects of “content” and “pedagogy”)
- Use the Tripod Project’s conceptual framework to organize local activities
- Use student and teacher surveys to collect data and analyze school climate and student engagement

Tripod surveys and associated analyses are based on an underlying conceptual model that has been developed and refined over six years. The framework draws on concepts and theories found in several literatures that do not cross-reference—including literatures as diverse as business marketing, social work, innovation diffusion, child development and group-process.

The fundamental idea guiding the Tripod conceptual model is that content, pedagogy and relationships comprise the three legs of the instructional tripod. If one leg of a tripod is too weak, it collapses. We should expect that attending well to all three will affect teachers' capacities and commitments to engage students effectively in learning and, therefore, students' preparation to reach prescribed academic performance standards.

The goal of the Tripod Project is to enhance school-level capacity to attend to all three legs of the tripod by effectively addressing five generic tasks of social and intellectual engagement in the classroom (box C in Figure 1). Because the Tripod Project survey asks students about individual classrooms, we are able to examine variation across classrooms rather than just conditions at the school level (see Figure 2, next page). In addition, a research component aims to refine our understanding of the ways that particular classroom conditions affect achievement among students of particular racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Figure 1. Overview of Tripod Conceptual Model



The basic idea is that: (A) adult and school organizational norms influence (B) classroom conditions, which influence (C) student engagement which, in turn, influences (D) student achievement. Our central focus, conceptually, is on achieving the five student engagement targets (Box C). The idea is that students will excel academically in a particular classroom (Box D) if they (Box C):

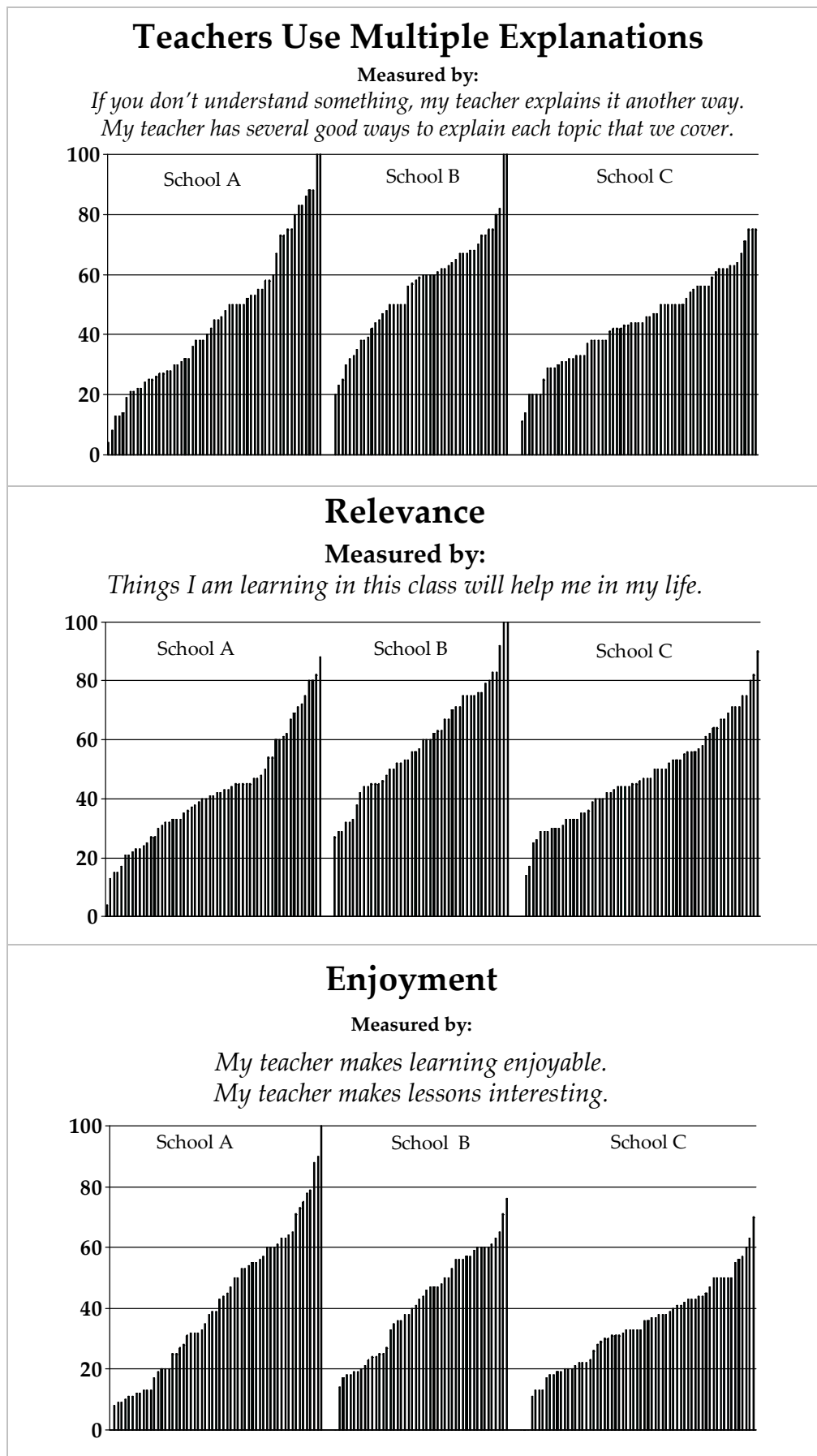
- (1) Begin the semester feeling **trustful** of the teacher and interested (instead of mistrustful and uninterested);
- (2) Experience a good balance between **teacher control and student autonomy** (instead of too little or too much of either);
- (3) Are **ambitiously goal-oriented in their learning** (instead of feeling ambivalent); and
- (4) **Work industriously** in pursuing their goals for learning (instead of becoming discouraged in the face of difficulty or disengaged due to boredom).
- (5) **Achieve satisfaction and consolidate** their new knowledge (with support from their teachers) and thus **are equipped to be and feel well prepared for future classes and life experiences**.

However, since we can not turn screws in students' heads to induce engagement, the school must create classroom conditions that help compel students to engage socially and intellectually. Under the Tripod framework, the five key classroom conditions that promote engagement are:

- (1) **Feasibility:** Instruction and supports help students believe that success is possible.
- (2) **Relevance:** Lessons respond to students curiosities, relate to their lived experiences, have clear purposes and are related to future pursuits.
- (3) **Enjoyment:** Lessons are interesting, stimulating and appropriately challenging.
- (4) **Teacher Support and Press:** Teachers are encouraging, supportive and demanding/ambitious.
- (5) **Peer Support:** Peers are supportive of others (or at least not detractors, e.g., teasing).

**Figure 2. Classroom Variation Across Selected Tripod Survey Items**

*Each vertical bar represents percentage agreement in an individual classroom.*



Finally, in order to ensure that a preponderance of classrooms in a given school creates the conditions that facilitate academic engagement, high achievement organizational norms need to exist throughout the school's professional learning community. Under the Tripod framework, effective professional learning communities that produce engagement and learning are characterized by the following five norms:

- (1) **Climate:** School climates characterized by high support and high press for all (including adults) are the norm.
- (2) **Distributed Leadership:** Multiple people play leadership roles and there is shared, mutual accountability for effort and outcomes.
- (3) **Curriculum:** Teachers have deep content knowledge and focus collectively on developing relevant, challenging, coherent and streamlined curricula.
- (4) **Instruction:** Instruction is focused on achieving mastery for all students of critical skills and "higher order" understanding of challenging content (appropriately differentiated).
- (5) **Assessment:** Assessment and feedback, both formative and summative, are targeted to support effective learning for students (and teachers) at all skill levels.

The Tripod conceptual model combines an overarching, comprehensive framework with a cogent theory of change that guides our examination of the key issues and challenges to American elementary and secondary school reform.