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# Characteristics of Effective Schools - Comparing Teachers' Perceptions with the 1987 Schools Excellence Report

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## Introduction

In an effort to encourage schools to excel, the Singapore education system has moved from a highly centralised system with tight control over schools to one of giving more autonomy to principals in schools. In 1986, 12 school principals were invited to accompany the Education Minister to study the management of 25 'acknowledged successful schools' in the U.K. and the U.S.A. and to find out what lessons could be learnt for Singapore. The principals' report, 'Towards Excellence in Schools', to then Minister for Education, Dr Tony Tan, was published on 3 February 1987. Some of the characteristics of good schools identified in that report included "capable headmaster", "effective and committed teachers", "favourable teacher-pupil ratio" and "flexible and broad-based curriculum". Since then there has been a pivotal focus on schools and a continuous effort, on the part of the Government, to encourage schools to excel and to forge their own identities. This has resulted in the development of independent and autonomous schools. There are now different types of schools, ranging from government to government-aided to autonomous to independent schools. However, the question still remains: "What makes a 'good' school good?" To answer this question, one should examine the characteristics of effective schools.

## Characteristics of Effective Schools

Research studies (e.g., Brookover and Lezotte, 1979; Purkey and Smith, 1983; and Sammons, Nuttall, Cuttance and Sally, 1995) on effective schools have yielded lists of characteristics of good or effective schools. Although there are some similar characteristics across these lists, they are neither exhaustive nor definitive. However, they can still serve as a precursor to further research into effective schools. Some of the more common characteristics include professional and administrative leadership, shared vision and goals, high academic expectations and a focus on achievement, frequent monitoring and home-school partnership. For phase one of this study, two research questions were posed: (1) What do Singapore secondary school teachers consider as characteristics of good schools? and (2) How do secondary school teachers' perceptions of the characteristics of good schools differ from the 15 characteristics listed in the 'Towards Excellence in Schools' report; i.e., from the principals' conclusions of their visit to 25 'acknowledged successful schools' in the U.K. and the U.S.A.?

## Teachers' Perceptions

The power of perception must never be underestimated. In the classrooms, teachers actually have more influence than principals over day-to-day classroom management decisions and studies have shown that they have significantly greater influence at the secondary school level (Firestone and Herriott, 1982). Andrews (1987, p. 10) when asked about teachers' perceptions of the leadership of their principals, said that "... researchers may mistrust perceptions, but in a sense, the only reality is perceived reality - and people's perceptions of the surroundings have a powerful influence on what they do." In view of this, the Louisiana School Effectiveness Study (Stringfield and Teddlie, 1988) included in its data, among many others, teachers' perceptions of their school climates.

## The Study

In Phase One of this study, 220 teachers from ten schools were surveyed. Of the 220, 108 (49.09%) were from government schools, 69 (31.36%) were from government-aided schools and the remaining 43 (19.55%) were from independent/autonomous schools.

Since the objective of this phase was for the respondents to list their perceptions of the characteristics of good secondary schools, the questionnaire focused only on the question: **“WHAT, IN YOUR OPINION, MAKES A GOOD (OR EFFECTIVE) SECONDARY SCHOOL?”** The survey method was used as the primary means of data collection. This method was deemed to be most appropriate since the information to be collected comes directly from the respondents. The data they provide are descriptions of their perceptions, attitudes and values of what they perceive as the characteristics of good secondary schools. The respondents were free to write as much or as little as they liked. All questionnaires were analysed and categories identified. All responses relating to a particular category were tabulated to yield a total frequency count. From the original list of 900 responses, 40 descriptive items remained (see Table 3). These items referred to a range of perceived characteristics of good secondary schools including; for example, principal and teacher personal qualities, enforcing strict discipline, conducive environment for students to learn, a broad and challenging academic programme, adequate clerical support for teachers and parental support for school programmes. These 40 items were further categorised and then subsumed under the five dimensions: **STAFF, STUDENTS, CURRICULUM, RESOURCES** and **PARENTS**. The following section seeks to answer the research questions raised earlier.

## Findings

After categorising all the responses, the **STAFF** dimension had the highest number of responses (N=554). About a third of these related to the category ‘principal’. Teachers tend to perceive principals as instructional leaders, school administrators, educational managers and more recently as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the school providing leadership, structure, management, vision and goal. They wrote:

*In a good school, the principal leads the staff in the school’s vision and mission and the principal provides direction and the motivation for improvement.*

In the teachers’ perceptions, these principals were fair and firm in making decisions and distributed duties fairly among teachers. They performed work well and were capable, competent and efficient. Principals also recognised and acknowledged contributions from the staff. One teacher wrote, *“principals should show more appreciation and consideration to teachers in order to encourage them to work happily”*. On the personal qualities of the principals, teachers perceived good schools to be run by principals who were sincere, confident and sensitive. Therefore, teachers perceived principals of good schools to be both efficient and effective.

Next on their list, teachers perceived good schools to have staff members who were committed and dedicated to the teaching profession. At the same time, teachers also believed that high staff morale must be promoted and that teachers and principals must share the same vision and work towards common goals. Several teachers wrote, *“staff morale can make or unmake a good secondary school”*. Another teacher highlighted the word *“cohesion”* and wrote, *“everybody should work towards the same goal”*.

Schools where the discipline is strict was also perceived to be another characteristic of effective schools. This category of responses formed the third largest within the **STAFF** dimension. Teachers’ perception of the state of discipline in schools and the fear that an unchecked situation might worsen discipline problems to the extent that teaching and learning can no longer be effectively carried out in class could perhaps account for the rather high ranking of this category of responses. Several teachers wrote, *“strict discipline should have top priority in school. In a school where discipline is lacking, it is almost impossible to achieve good academic results”*.

The **STUDENTS** dimension formed the second highest number of responses (N=190). About a fifth of them regarded schools to be effective if they have students excelling both in examinations and extra-curricula activities (ECAs). Other teachers considered schools to be good

if they provided a conducive environment for students to learn (N=36) or helped students develop a love for learning as a life-long process (N=27).

The **CURRICULUM** dimension ranked third with 73 responses. More than half of these noted that schools which have a "solid" instructional programme are good schools. By "solid", teachers meant that the curriculum was comprehensive, well-integrated across subjects, and also offers a wide range of extra-curricular activities (ECAs).

In the **RESOURCES** dimension, half of the 66 responses belonged to the category of physical resources. Physical resources refer to facilities and equipment such as special rooms, audio-visual aid and photocopying machines. Teachers perceived having adequate physical resources in schools to be one component of an effective school. One third of the responses related to human resources. Teachers perceived that good schools are characterised by the provision of adequate clerical support for teachers and the reduction of class size to one teacher for every 25 students. Research findings regarding class size is inconclusive.

The **PARENTS** dimension had the smallest number of responses (N=17). The teachers' perception is that parents who support school programmes and take an active interest in their children's learning would contribute to making a school effective.

These findings are summarised in Table 1.

## Discussion

In many aspects, teachers' perceptions of the characteristics of good schools were the same as those listed in the "Towards Excellence in Schools" report (see Table 2). Data from the present study showed that some other characteristics perceived by teachers to be important were not mentioned in the report. Some of these were "Enforcing strict discipline", "Students have respect for teachers" and "High staff morale". The only two characteristics in the report which were not mentioned by teachers were (1) responsible governing board and (2) single-session schools. This is understandable because schools in Singapore have School Advisory Committees and School Management Councils but they are not quite the same as the governing boards mentioned in the report. It is highly likely that teachers did not mention responsible governing boards as a characteristic of good schools because this is a 'non-issue' for them. These committee and council members hardly interact with teachers directly. And as far as single-session schools are concerned, it was only recently that the Ministry of Education had announced plans to make all secondary schools single-session by the year 2000.

What was interesting was the fact that while the teachers' list of characteristics of good schools matched that of the principals', the two groups did not necessarily attach the same level of importance to these characteristics. For example, it was found that while teachers perceived the 'principal and teachers' characteristics (or the **STAFF** dimension) to be the most important characteristic, principals, on the other hand, identified the enhancement of student success in public examinations and the enforcement of firm school discipline as significant in creating effective schools. Thus, there seems to be a gap between the teachers' perceptions and the principals' perceptions.

Basically, there are two perspectives to this perception gap. From the teachers' perspective, they work very closely with their principals and with the continual emphasis the Ministry of Education places on the roles and responsibilities of the school principal - as the visionary leader, the authority figure to teachers, the professional head and the skilful manager - it is little wonder that teachers look up to their heads and therefore perceive them (i.e., the **STAFF** dimension) to be the most important feature of good schools. The then Minister for Education, Mr Lee Yock Suan, in his opening address at the Principals' Conference in 1995 said that, "The principal, in particular, deserves special recognition... and it was generally observed that outstanding leadership is a key characteristic of outstanding schools." On the other hand, from the principals' perspective, the external school appraisal by the Ministry of Education and, in particular, the annual school ranking are likely to add extra pressure on them to ensure that their schools perform well in the ranking. And this is not likely to happen unless there is the

enforcement of firm discipline in schools. Thus, it is only natural that principals identified the enhancement of student success in public examinations and the enforcement of firm school discipline as significant in creating effective schools.

### Implications

Since teachers perceived good schools to be characterised by principals who are fair and firm in decision making and who distribute duties fairly among staff, these findings should be communicated to principals and vice-principals in schools and to potential principals during their Diploma-in-Educational Administration (DEA) programme - the one-year principal preparatory programme. While it will not always be easy or feasible for principals to be equitable in distributing duties among staff, what perhaps needs to be emphasized is for principals to handle the matter in such a way that they are **perceived** by teachers to be fair. One such way is to be open with teachers and persuade them to see the 'big picture' in any given situation.

Another is for the DEA programme to include more case studies of real and difficult situations in schools. Principals should also be conscious of the importance of developing and projecting personal qualities such as sincerity, confidence, sensitivity and perceptiveness since teachers perceive principals of good schools to have these qualities. The Singapore Secondary School Principals' Association (SSSPA), the Principals' Executive Centre (PEC) and the Singapore Educational Administration Society (SEAS) could perhaps jointly organise more sharing sessions for principals to discuss how they could acquire and nurture the qualities described above.

### Conclusion

The aim of Phase One of this exploratory study was to identify what teachers in Singapore secondary schools perceived to be characteristics of good schools. One major finding is that teachers consistently perceived the STAFF dimension to be an important characteristic of good schools; particularly referring to principals who were fair and firm in making decisions and who distributed duties fairly among teachers. The implications of this finding are many, e.g., the Principals' Executive Centre should continue to provide a platform for dissemination of information and mutual support among principals enhancing their professionalism and thus contributing to greater school effectiveness. The findings of this present study and other studies in future would have great implications for school administrators and educational policy-makers in our efforts to create more effective schools.

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Table 1: Summary of Top Three Phase One Responses in each Dimension by Gender

Dimension	Male	Female	N	% <sup>1</sup>	% <sup>2</sup>
<b>STAFF</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>408</b>	<b>554</b>		<b>61.56</b>
Principal	42	117	159	28.70	17.67
Teachers	23	76	99	17.87	11.00
Discipline	27	53	80	14.44	8.89
<b>STUDENTS</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>190</b>		<b>21.11</b>
Excel in exams and ECAs	8	32	40	21.05	4.44
Conducive environment.	17	19	36	18.95	4.00
Enjoy learning	11	16	27	14.21	3.00
<b>CURRICULUM</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>73</b>		<b>8.11</b>
Solid instructional programme	14	31	45	61.64	5.00
Integrated	10	9	19	26.03	2.11
Relevance	-	5	5	6.85	0.55
<b>RESOURCES</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>66</b>		<b>7.33</b>
Physical	16	17	33	50.00	3.67
Human	4	19	23	34.85	2.56
Others	4	6	10	15.15	1.11
<b>PARENTS</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>17</b>		<b>1.89</b>
Support school programmes	4	4	8	47.06	0.89
Interest in children's learning	2	5	7	41.18	0.78
Strong communication links with parents	1	1	2	11.76	0.22

**Note:**

%<sup>1</sup> -- Number of item responses expressed as a percentage of total number of items within the same dimension.

%<sup>2</sup> -- Total number of responses in each dimension expressed as a percentage of all 900 responses.

Table 2: A Comparison of the Characteristics of Good Schools as Identified in the 1987 "Towards Excellence in Schools" Report and those reported by Teachers in Phase One Survey

Characteristics of Good Schools		
Identified in 1987 Schools Excellence Report	Reported by Teachers in Phase One Survey	Item # in Table 3
1. Capable headmaster	✓	17b(i)
2. Responsible governing board	×	-
3. Flexibility and latitude given headmaster in selecting teachers and deciding on curriculum and other school matters	✓	17a(ii)
4. Effective and committed teachers	✓	21
5. Selective admission of pupils	✓	20
6. Enrolment of manageable size	✓	6
7. Favourable teacher-pupil ratio	✓	6
8. Comprehensive PCCG prog.	✓	13
9. Flexible and broad-based curr.	✓	12
10. Wide range of ECAs	✓	2
11. Single-session schools	×	-
12. Adequate physical resources	✓	15
13. Clear delineation of responsibilities between academic and non-academic staff	✓	16
14. Adequate ancillary support	✓	11
15. Close parental and alumni relationships.	✓	4

**Table 3: 40 descriptive items obtained from Phase One**

No.	Dimension	Item
1	Curriculum	An instructional programme that provides a broad and challenging academic education.
2	Curriculum	An integrated curriculum that provides a balance of subject areas and various ECAs.
3	Staff	Enforcing strict discipline.
4	Parents	Parents realise that education is a co-operative venture between school and home. Parents support school programmes.
5	Students	A conducive environment for students to learn.
6	Resources	Reducing class size to 1 teacher for every 25 students.
7	Curriculum	Curriculum content that is current and relevant to world needs.
8	Staff	Emphasizing character development among students.
9	Parents	Parents have an active interest in their children's learning.
10	Students	Students feel proud belonging to their school.
11	Resources	Adequate clerical support for teachers.
12	Curriculum	Broad curriculum structure that achieves an educational outcome of well-rounded students.
13	Curriculum	An effective pastoral care programme.
14	Students	Students who excel both in examinations and ECAs.
15	Resources	Adequate facilities and equipment such as special rooms, AVA and photocopying machines.
16	Staff	Less administrative duties for teachers. Teachers only teach.
17a (i)	Staff	A principal who is understanding and approachable.
17a (ii)	Staff	A principal who has foresight, is visionary and dares to make changes.
17a (iii)	Staff	A principal who is fair and firm in making decisions.
17a (iv)	Staff	A principal who distributes duties fairly among teachers.
17b (i)	Staff	A principal who is capable, competent and efficient.
17b (ii)	Staff	A principal who is dedicated and diligent.
17b (iii)	Staff	A principal who is resourceful and organised.
17c (i)	Staff	A principal who is sincere.
17c (ii)	Staff	A principal who is confident.
17c (iii)	Staff	A principal who is sensitive.
17c (iv)	Staff	A principal who is perceptive.
17c (v)	Staff	A principal who is cheerful.
17c (vi)	Staff	A principal who is dynamic.
18	Students	Students have respect for teachers.
19	Students	Students develop a love for learning (as a life-long process).
20	Students	A better cohort of students.
21	Staff	Teachers who are committed and dedicated to the teaching profession.
22	Staff	Teachers who are happy and cheerful.
23	Staff	Teachers who are compassionate and caring.
24	Staff	Teachers who are co-operative to work with.
25	Staff	Harmonious relations among staff members.
26	Staff	High staff morale.
27	Staff	Principal and teachers share the same vision and work towards common goals.
28	Staff	Principal recognises and acknowledges staff contributions.