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Adolescents' Perceptions of their Schools'

Ethos and Practices in Singapore

Agnes Chang Shook Cheong

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**Adolescents' Perceptions of their Schools'  
Ethos and Practices in Singapore**

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There is great interest recently among educationists in identifying environmental dimensions and to assess their educational implications. Many studies carried out in numerous countries have given strong support for the predictive validity of students' perceptions (Trickett, 1978; Moos, 1979; Fraser and Fisher, 1982; Harnisch, 1987; Manor, 1987). These perceptions have accounted for a substantial variance in learning outcome often more than that attributable to students' traits (Fraser and Fisher, 1982).

From the studies of school effects (Good, 1979; Rutter *et al*, 1979; Brophy, 1982; Chang, 1983; Harnisch, 1987; Manor, 1987), the variables that seem important include instructional teaching in the school, curriculum organization, quality of teaching staff, organizational and management practices, school ethos and classroom climate.

School practices capture the manner in which school policies are implemented in the classrooms for students to have the most meaningful educational experiences. It is the school processes and practices in the classroom which shape the students' attitudes and motives (Fraser, 1980; Chang, 1983).

There is a plethora of literature on the effects of school environment, school ethos and school climate on academic outcomes (Brookover, Schweitzer, Beady, Flood and Wisenbaker, 1978; Harnisch and Sato, 1983; Squires, Huitt, and Segers, 1983; Willms, 1985; Manor, 1987; Harnisch, 1987). In contrast, there are much fewer documented studies which look into the effects school ethos and school practices have in preparing a child for his adult role in society.

The same modern traits have also been identified by Dansereau and his associates (1979) as important support strategies to effective study skills. Other studies on study skills (Bragstad and Stumpf, 1982; Weinstein and Mayer, 1986) support Dansereau *et al's* findings.

Inkeles' findings (1969) confirmed that education is the most important of the influences moving men away from traditionalism towards modernity in developing countries. Studies by Armer and Youtz (1971), Feldman (1975) and Delacroix and Ragin (1978) yielded findings which give support to Inkeles' conclusions. Inkeles believed that the influences of the schools besides not mainly in its formal, explicit, pedagogic activity, but is inherent in the school as an organization. The modernizing effects follow not from the school's curriculum but rather from its informal, implicit and often unconscious program for dealing with its students, that is, its school practices.

The Singapore society is a meritocratic society that, through the political leaders and other authority figures, places great emphasis on individual achievement, punctuality,

efficient use of time and far-sighted planning.

It is the purpose of this study to find out how our adolescents from different school types perceive their schools' ethos and the degree to which their schools attempt to promote the development of 'modern traits' in them.

Research into sex differences in general attitude towards school has revealed that girls tend to hold more favourable attitudes than boys. Barker Lunn (1972) in England, Fitt (1956) in New Zealand and, Keeves (1972), Fraser (1980) and Poole (1983) in Australia reported similar findings.

Hence the second question addressed in study is whether gender makes a difference in adolescents' perceptions of their schools' ethos and practices.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Sample**

Two hundred and seventy-seven Secondary 4 (grade 10) students from six schools participated in the study. Two schools of each school type viz Premier, Mission and Government, were chosen to form the six sample schools. Table 1 gives the comparison between school types.

Only 250 sets of data were used in the final analysis as 27 sets of questionnaires were found to be incomplete. Of the 250 subjects, 128 were girls and 122 boys.

### **2.2 Instrumentation**

Data were collected through the use of two questionnaires entitled "School Ethos" and "School Practices and Procedures".

There were 51 items in the Questionnaire on School Ethos. The maximum possible marks were 207 and the minimum 51. Table 2 presents the content of the school Ethos Questionnaire.

Cronbach alpha was computed on the research sample data. High internal consistency was maintained as the Cronbach alpha obtained was .91. Moreover, intercorrelations between the content areas (school's goals, rapport between school personnel and students, student's attitudes towards school, school facilities, school discipline) and with the total score were significant beyond the .0001 level (Table 3).

The 40 items in the "School Practices and Procedures" Questionnaire covered four different areas. The content of the questionnaire is found in Table 4.

Five different scores were obtained from the Questionnaire, one for each scale viz., Time-management, Decision-making, Planning, Achievement and Independence.

Cronbach alphas were also computed for each scale and presented in Table 5.

### 3. RESULTS

The following criteria are adopted for presenting and high-lighting the results:

- 1) Only correlation coefficients which are significant at .01 level are presented.
- 2) Only two decimal places are shown.

#### 3.1 Comparative Studies

Two comparative studies were carried out:

- 1) Comparison of school types.
- 2) Comparison of the sexes.

##### 3.1.1 Comparison of School Types

It is of interest to determine which relationships are common to three school types and those of which differences are apparent. The results are presented in the following order:

- 1) Means and standard deviations of the variables are first tabulated and univariate F-ratios computed.
- 2) The relationships between school practices.
- 3) The relationship between school ethos and school practice.

**3.1.1.1 Means, Standard Deviations and Univariate F-ratios of variables for Three School Types** The students in all school types viewed their schools' ethos positively with mean scores ranging from 161.32 (Government) to 165.44 (Mission). The maximum possible score was 207. The means of school ethos of the three schools were not significantly different (Table 6). Generally the schools showed little differences in their perceptions of the training given in time-management and achievement. The mean scores of over 13 points in time-management indicated that Singapore schools were very time-conscious. Surprisingly, the schools were not perceived by their students as trying too hard in helping them to achieve. Some effort was perceived as being put into training the students to be independent adults. Planning and decision-making were given the lowest ratings by the students. Differences were perceived between school types in the training provided by the schools in decision-making, planning and independence. The F-ratios for the perceptions of school training in decision-making, future-planning and independence were significant beyond the .01 level. An examination of the means of these variables showed a trend with the Mission Schools achieving the highest scores and the Premier

Schools, the lowest (Figure 1). The results indicated that the differences among the three school types did not lie in the school ethos but in some of the school processes and practices.

As the Mission Schools were seen to be more progressive, especially SPSS, it was probable that the means of one school could have raised the means of the Mission Schools. Hence test of significance were carried out for school training in decision-making (S-aut), planning (S-plan) and independence (S-indp) (Table 7). The results indicated that SPSS was perceived as providing more effective training in decision-making ( $t = 3.93, p < .001$ ). There was no significant difference in planning between the two schools. STC was seen to give better training in independence.

#### 3.1.1.2 Relationships between Practices

Although there were obvious differences between school types; all correlations were positive, indicating that the school processes, irrespective of school type, were supportive of one another (Table 8).

School punctuality (S-time) was related to school future planning (S-plan) (Premier, Mission), school achievement expectation (S-ach) (Mission), school decision-making (S-aut) (Premier, Mission) and school independence training (S-indp) (Premier, Mission). There was a noticeable lack of relationship between school time-management training (S-time) and other school processes in the Government Schools.

School future-planning correlated significantly with achievement (Mission) decision-making and independence (Premier, Mission). Relationships were also established between school independence and both achievement (Mission, Government) and decision-making (Premier, Government).

It is interesting to note that only the relationship between school future-planning and school decision-making was common across the three school types. There was no significant relationship between achievement and decision-making.

#### 3.1.1.3 Relationships between School Ethos and School Practices

School ethos (S-ethos) had a positive relationship with all the school process variables, irrespective of school type (Table 9). School punctuality (S-time) and school independence (S-indp) were strongly related to school ethos. School ethos

also correlated significantly with planning (S-plan) (Premier, Mission) achievement expectation (S-ach) (Mission) and decision-making (S-aut) (Premier, Government).

### **3.1.2 Comparison of the Sexes**

Traditionally, Chinese families are known to favour boys: previous research findings have recorded differential treatments of the sexes and the consequential effects on their school outcomes (Barker Lunn, 1972; Fraser, 1980, Poole, 1983). Hence it is interesting to examine the familiarities and differences in attitudes between the sexes and the effects of school on them. The results are presented in the same order as in the comparison of school types.

#### **3.1.2.1 Means, Standard Deviations and Univariate F-ratios of Variables for the Sexes**

It is noticeable that the girls rated their schools' ethos more positively than the boys ( $p < .001$ ). There were no significant differences between the sexes' perceptions of school training in achievement, time-management, autonomy and future-planning (Table 10). Girls also perceived a greater emphasis on school training in independence ( $p < .001$ ).

#### **3.1.2.2 Relationships between School Practices**

Both boys and girls perceived their school training processes as being congruous with each other, especially the girls (Table 11). For both sexes, training in achievement did not correlate significantly with training in time-management and autonomous decision-making.

#### **3.1.2.3 Relationships between School ethos and School Practices**

With the exception of training in achievement, the relationships between school ethos and school variables were much stronger for the girls (Table 12). There was no significant association between school ethos and training in achievement for the girls. Though not highly significant, the correlation between the two variables was close to the accepted .01 level for the boys.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Comparison of School Types**

Previous research findings (Inkeles, 1969; Armer and Youtz, 1971; Feldman, 1975; Delacroix and Ragin, 1978, Chang, 1983) established the school as a

powerful modernizing institution. Rutter *et al.*, (1979) and Marjoribanks (1981) concluded from their studies that children's perceptions of their school environment have moderate to strong links with school-related outcomes. Other studies indicate that school climate affects student's cognitive and effective behavior (Weber, 1971; Brookover *et al.*, 1978; Duke and Perry, 1978), values (Taba, 1955, Vyskocil and Goens, 1979), motivation, achievement, attitudes and self-concept (Chen and Fresko, 1978; Fleming, 1981), planning, time-management, achievement motivation (Chang, 1983). All these studies reinforced the all important position of the school as a socializing agent in the life-long education of a person.

Though three different school types participated in the study, the results showed that the students perceived little differences between them in terms of school ethos. This could be due to some of the following reasons. All the schools are government or government-aided schools and hence share common educational goals, common curriculum, common syllabi, common public examinations and common standard facilities. One is happy to note that student's attitudes towards their schools' ethos were generally positive.

As Singaporeans, we always pride ourselves for our efficiency and ability in keeping deadlines. We have proven to our investors that our workers are able to deliver the goods on time. This efficiency could be traced back all the way to the schools. All schools, irrespective of school types scored well in school training in time-management. A surprising outcome was the rather unexpected rating given to training in achievement in all the sample schools. In an achievement-oriented society, all teachers and principals irrespective of school types and student types would try their very best to get students to do well. It is not uncommon to hear of remedial lessons over the weekends and during the vacations. Does the low score signify ineffective, though well-intentional practices? Are the incentives used to motivate achievement attractive to all students? Maybe the hard work put in by both teachers and students are not yielding the expected results. Maybe students need to be taught how to learn and use the facts and notes given liberally to them by the teachers. One must not assume that all students are effective learners (Dansereau *et al.*, 1979; Bragstad and Stumpf, 1982; Weinstein and Mayer, 1986). One significant point to note here is that students from the Premier Schools did not view their training in achievement as being more favourable than students in the Mission and Government Schools. It is also possible that students in the Premier Schools have higher expectations and hence were more critical.

The school practices which showed significant differences between the schools were training in independence, decision-making and planning. In all three practices, the Mission Schools were perceived by their students as doing better in equipping them with these skills. It was found that even between the two Mission Schools, SPSS was providing better training in decision-making than the other school. SPSS boasts of having the only Student Parliament among the secondary schools. The Premier Schools had the lowest scores. High societal and parental expectations may have caused the Premier Schools

which are also Mission schools to put heavy emphasis on academic achievement.

The suspicion voiced earlier concerning the probable oversight of not providing students with formal study skills surfaces again in the face of the poor showings in planning and decision-making. Good study skills involve effective scheduling and wise decision-making in the choice of methods and questions. Good guidance on the part of the teachers and supervised practices are required to develop these skills.

In view of Inkeles' treatise (1969) that effective planning and autonomous decision-making are also essential traits in a person learning to cope with the rapid changes taking place in a modernizing country, we have to re-examine our effort in preparing our young citizens for a meaningful adult life in Singapore.

Our schools are not doing too badly in terms of independence training. The range of extra-curricular activities such as NCC, Boy Scouts, Red Cross provided in schools give our students lots of room for development in independence. Most of these activities are offered in the schools. But even then, the Mission schools were perceived by their students as doing more in developing them into independent persons.

School ethos as perceived by students correlated positively with all school variables but with variations between schools, indicating the close relationships between the school ethos and their training processes in time-management, planning and independence. It is noted that training in achievement was not significantly related to school ethos within either the Premier or Government schools. In the Premier Schools, students were carefully chosen scholars who were self-motivated and hence it is probable that overt pressures and reminders to achieve were not perceived by the students. In the Government Schools, most students seemed to perceive the schools as putting great pressure on achievement but the school ethos was not viewed as encouraging by students as it was in the other two school types.

#### 4.2 Comparison of the Sexes

Previous findings that girls hold more favourable attitudes towards their schools than boys (Barker Lunn, 1972; Kneevs, 1972; Fraser, 1980; Poole, 1983) were supported but the only significant difference in perceived practice was in training in independence.

The girls perceived greater congruence between school practices than the boys. This may be due to the fact that girls are more conforming and keen for teachers' approval (Frazier and Sadker, 1973; Gray, 1975; Ramirez and Price-Williams, 1976; Sutton and Nicholls, 1977).

For both sexes, there was a strong relationship between perceptions of school ethos and of the training and practices of the school. However, the girls did

not yield a significant relationship between perceived school ethos and perceived training in achievement while the boys did. This indicates that girls who rated their school ethos highly did not necessarily view their schools as providing the necessary training in achievement whereas the boys did.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The present study found that students from different school types perceived little differences between their school ethos. Significant differences however existed between school training in independence, planning and decision-making.

Girls were more positive about their schools' ethos than the boys. The schools were also viewed by the girls as being doing more in inculcating independence in them

In view of the importance placed on achievement, decision-making, planning and time-management by Inkeles (1969) as traits for successful living in a modernizing country, we teachers have to make concerted effort in developing these identified characteristics in our students. Further more, these traits have also been found to be supportive of productive learning.

For many years, we have concentrated on using academic achievement as a measure for effective schools. If we are looking at schools as major social institutions for preparing excellent citizens for tomorrow, we would have to enlarge our scope to encompass affective outcomes in our assessment.

Schools and their practices do make a difference in the overall development of children.

**Editors**     *This paper was read at the First Annual Conference of the Educational Research Association of Singapore, held in Singapore on 5-6 September 1987.*

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Table 1 – Comparison between Different School Types

School Type	Premier		Mission				Government				
School	CHS		SNGS	SPSS	STC		SCSS		ASS		
Sex of Subjects	Boy		Girl	Boy	Girl		Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	
No. of Subjects	48		49	40	49		22	25	23	21	
Subtotal	97		89				91				
Sample Total	277										
Average Age (In Years)	15.5		15.5	15.6	16		15.6		15.3		
Grade Point Average for the best 5 subjects in Sec III Final Exams	25.6		25.75	24.26	24.74		25.10		25.32		
GCE "O" Level % of Passess	1979	1980	1979	1979	1980	1979	1980	1979	1980	1979	1980
	83.4	91	99.3	77.5	74	78	74	63	66.6	66.7	77
No. of Assembly per week	1		1	1	1		1		1		
No. of Moral Ed/Catechism Period per week	2/3/1		3	3	3		1		1		
Parent-Teacher Association * Informal Meeting	—		—		*		—		—		
Student Parliament	—		—		—		—		—		
Student Council	—		—		—		—		—		

Table 2 – Content of School Ethos Questionnaire

Content	Objective	Item Number	Scoring Format	Direction of Scale/Item
(1) School goals	Measures variety of educational aims of school	1–9		High scores indicate large number of goals.
(2) Rapport between school personnel and students (School climate + Teacher-pupil interaction + Principal-pupil interaction)	Measures the degree of warmth in rapport between school personnel and students	10, 11, 13, 14, 19, 20, 22, 24, 26–29, 35, 37–42	Likert Scale	High scores indicate good rapport between school personnel and students.
(3) Student's attitudes towards school (Pride in the school + attitude towards school)	Measures the degree of positive regard for the school	12, 15–18, 21, 23, 33, 34, 36, 43–45		High scores indicate high regard for the school.
(4) School facilities	Measures students' satisfaction with school's facilities	25, 30–32, 50, 51		High scores indicate a high degree of satisfaction with school facilities.
(5) School discipline	Measures the degree of strictness in school discipline	46, 47, 48, 49		High scores indicate a low degree of strictness in discipline and low scores correspond to a high degree of strictness.

Table 3 – Intercorrelations between Content Areas, and Total Score of Questionnaire 1

	<u>SM1</u>	<u>SM2</u>	<u>SM3</u>	<u>SM4</u>	<u>SM5</u>	<u>SMT</u>
SM1	1.00*					
SM2	.43*	1.00*				
SM3	.36*	.69*	1.00*			
SM4	.24*	.43*	.45*	1.00*		
SM5	.28*	.60*	.51*	.41*	1.00*	
SMT	.62*	.90*	.85*	.61*	.70*	1.00*

\*  $p < .001$

**Key:**

- SM1: School's goals
- SM2: Rapport between school personnel and students
- SM3: Students' attitudes towards school
- SM4: School facilities
- SM5: School discipline
- SMT: Total score

Table 4 – Content of Questionnaire on School Practices and Procedures

Content	Objective	Item Number	Item Total	Direction of Scale/Item
(1) Time-management	Measures the degree of stress put on punctuality in school	1, 2, 31, 36–38	6	High scores indicate great stress put on punctuality in school.
(2) Decision-making	Measures the variety of opportunities provided for decision-making in school	3–7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12	15	High scores indicate many opportunities provided for decision-making in school.
(3) Planning	Measures the variety of training given in planning in school	14, 15, 16, 17, 18	5	High scores indicate many kinds of training given in planning in school.
(4) Achievement	Measures the strength of motivation in achievement generated by school	19, 20–24, 39, 40	8	High scores indicate a high level of motivation generated by school to achieve academically.
(5) Independence	Measures the variety of training given in independence by school	25–28, 29, 30	6	High scores indicate many types of training given in independence by school.

Table 6 – Comparison of Means and Standard Deviations of Variables in Three School Types

	Premier (I) (N=81)		Mission (II) (N=83)		Government (III) (N=80)		F	P
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.		
<b>SCHOOL</b>								
S-ethos	162.60	18.55	165.44	20.77	161.32	18.06	1.09	.34
S-time	13.59	1.82	13.40	1.45	13.43	1.76	.33	.72
S-aut	26.54	4.16	29.16	4.72	26.84	4.10	10.01	.00*
S-plan	11.87	2.37	13.08	2.63	12.23	2.55	5.62	.00*
S-ach	21.96	3.03	21.70	2.60	22.37	2.48	1.42	.24
S-indp	15.81	2.38	17.53	2.49	16.45	2.53	11.38	.00*

Table 5 – Possible Minimum and Maximum Scores and Cronbach Alphas for Scales in Questionnaire on School Practices and Procedures

Scale	Possible minimum	Possible maximum	Cronbach Alpha
(1) Time-management	2	17	.36
(2) Decision-making	11	50	.58
(3) Planning	5	20	.63
(4) Achievement	7	30	.31
(5) Independence	6	24	.59

Table 7 – T-Tests for Means of S-aut, S-plan and S-indp between SPSS and STC (Mission Schools)

Variable	School	Mean	SD	T	df	P
S-aut	SPSS	31.18	4.22	3.93	87	.00
	STC	25.51	.49			
S-plan	SPSS	13.25	2.22	.55	87	.58
	STC	12.94	2.94			
S-indp	SPSS	16.75	1.79	2.76	87	.01
	STC	18.16	2.8			

\* N (SPSS) = 40  
N (STC) = 49

Table 8 – Correlations between School Practices (Schools)

Variables and their Relationships		Premier Sch (I) N=87	Mission Sch (II) N=83	Government Sch (III) N=80
S–time	* S–plan	.24	.35	–
	* S–ach	–	.30	–
	* S–aut	.45	.31	–
	* S–indp	.26	.30	–
S–time	* S–ach	–	.25	–
	* S–aut	.44	.55	.42
	* S–indp	.34	–	.31
S–ach	* S–aut	–	–	–
	* S–indp	–	.33	.47
S–aut	* S–indp	.45	–	.50

Table 9 – Relationships between School Ethos and School Practices (Schools)

Variables and their Relationships		Premier Sch (I) N=87	Mission Sch (II) N=83	Government Sch (III) N=80
S–ethos	* S–time	.57	.44	.43
	* S–plan	.29	.37	–
	* S–ach	–	.43	–
	* S–aut	.66	–	.33
	* S–indp	.33	.43	.34

Table 10 – Comparison of Means and Standard Deviations of Variables between Sexes

	Boys (N=122)		Girls (N=128)		F	P
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.		
<b>SCHOOL</b>						
S–ethos	156.28	18.67	170.64	17.45	39.52	.00
S–ach	22.21	2.87	21.80	2.59	1.45	.23
S–time	13.33	1.69	13.74	1.55	4.10	.04
S–plan	12.51	2.35	12.50	2.63	.01	.97
S–indp	16.13	2.27	17.54	2.69	12.39	.00
S–aut	12.55	4.16	12.66	5.00	.04	.85

Tables 11 – Correlations between School Practices (Sexes)

Variables and their Relationships		Boys (N=122)	Girls (N=128)
S–time	* S–plan	–	.35
	* S–ach	–	–
	* S–aut	.21	.47
	* S–indp	–	.23
S–plan	* S–ach	–	.26
	* S–aut	.49	.51
	* S–indp	.28	.35
S–ach	* S–aut	–	–
	* S–indp	.29	.36
S–aut	* S–indp	.37	.47

Table 12 — Relationships between School and Ethos and School Variables (Sexes)

Variables and their Relationships		Boys (N=122)	Girls (N=128)
S- ethos	* S-time	.42	.51
	* S-plan	.20	.42
	* S-ach	(.19)	—
	* S-aut	.31	.58
	* S-indp	.31	.54