
Title	Achieving schools: An intercultural study of success against the odds
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Source	<i>NIECER Research Bulletin</i> , 2(1), 6
Published by	National Institute of Education Centre for the Educational Research, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

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Citation: Sharpe, L. (1997). Achieving schools: An intercultural study of success against the odds. *NIECER Research Bulletin*, 2(1), 6.

Research Reports

Achieving Schools: An Intercultural Study of Success Against the Odds

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This study involves in-depth analysis of eight secondary schools that have been identified as "achieving schools". Two schools from four participating countries have been involved in the study, the aim being to identify common mechanisms of success and to highlight good educational practice. The countries involved are Hong Kong, Singapore, People's Republic of China and the United Kingdom. Each school has been studied by a research team comprising an educationalist, a person from the business world and a person involved in a professional field outside of education.

Two secondary schools were chosen for the Singapore part of the study by the Ministry of Education in Singapore on the basis of their value-added rankings in the school performance tables. For the purpose of the study 'achieving against the odds' is defined in terms of each school's success in achieving higher results in the secondary school leaving examinations than expected from the quality of its intake. So defined, the selected schools have both consistently achieved against the odds over the last four years, having produced much higher GCE 'N' and 'O' level results than were expected on the basis of their PSLE intake scores.

Each school was studied over a period of seven months, beginning in May 1996, by a research team comprising individuals with considerable experience and status in their respective fields. One team comprised the director of a major multinational marine and supply company operating in Singapore, the managing director of one of the island's two bus companies, and a senior lecturer from the National Institute of Education (NIE). Both business partners also hold other professional positions, one being Chairman of the Institute of Technical Education and the other Chairman of the Singapore Sports Council. The other team comprised the chairman of a multinational electronics corporation operating in

Singapore, a founding partner in a prominent firm of solicitors in Singapore, and the Dean of the School of Education, NIE. Additionally the teams were able to draw on the expertise and assistance of the Ministry of Education's Research and Testing Division. Thus, as envisaged in the project's overall research design, both teams drew on extensive knowledge and experience of business and professional organisations as well as knowledge of the local school system and the effective school literature.

A wide range of data was collected. Both schools supplied extensive documentation, including year books, action plans, self-appraisal reports, minutes of committees, financial budget statements, teacher profiles and staff development programmes, and analyses of pupils' SES backgrounds. Open-ended interviews were conducted with the principal, vice principal, heads of departments, subject staff, members of the Parent Support Group (PSG), parents, counsellors and pupils. Various school events were attended by one or more of the research teams, for example assemblies, committee meetings, a staff meeting, a meet-the-parents session, a parent support group seminar, speech day, Teachers' Day celebrations and Teachers' Dinner. A closed-end pupil questionnaire was administered, and one of the educationists tracked a total of fifteen students over one school day each, accompanying them to their lessons and breaks and interviewing them at the end of the school day. During tracking, classroom observations were made, using a simple observation schedule to gather basic quantitative data, as well as qualitative procedures which focused on teacher control strategies.

At the moment of writing, the research reports have been written and are being studied by the school principals concerned, following which they will be incorporated into a forthcoming book, edited by Prof Peter Mortimore of the University of London Institute of Education.