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| Author(s) | Ruth Wong Yeang Lam |
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The Relationship between Teacher Morale and School Climate

Ruth Wong Yeang Lam

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between teacher morale and school climate in order to find out which aspects of the school climate affect teacher morale most. Two questionnaires were administered to 305 teachers in six secondary schools in

Singapore — the Staff Morale Questionnaire (SMQ) and the School-level Environment Questionnaire (SLEQ). Climate subscales were found to be significant predictors of teacher morale, with *Professional Interest* explaining the greatest amount of variance.

Introduction

Teaching has often been considered a “marginal profession” because it does not enjoy the privileges normally accorded to professionals. Lamentably, society regards teachers as respectable but not respected; as necessary but not essential; as general craftsmen but not professionals; as those who can’t do but simply teach.

In the face of such a social reality which accords teaching a low status occupation, the self-image of teachers is lowered, their sense of power is decreased, and this in turn lowers their level of competence and morale in wider circles of social interaction.

Despite the amount of time and the authorized power teachers have in the classroom, they have been unable to present an acceptable image of their value to society. This is partly because society devalues the skills and competencies teachers have to offer. The teachers are made responsible for things beyond their control — from being babysitters (invigilating students) to serving as social workers (checking out the family background of the students). In most schools, teachers are treated as interchangeable parts. Regardless of

their different talents and experiences, they are given identical instructional roles, responsibilities and prestige.

Indeed, the teaching profession seems imperilled. The rising expectation of parents on teachers, the strict emphasis on covering the syllabus, and the increasing obsession with examination results, lead to an erosion of the creative challenge and idealism of teaching. Today teaching is no longer a distinctive occupation. Lortie (1975, p. 10) described the teacher’s social position as “special but shadowed”, and lamented that teaching has not been accorded the respectability that it rightfully deserves.

To what extent has this situation been brought about by the school climate? Eicholtz (1984) and Sergiovanni (1984) have concurred that school climate is the key to excellence and effectiveness in our schools. A positive school climate serves as a catalyst that makes people willing to do more to help the institution and its people reach their objectives. It affects and permeates all aspects of the school — achievement, attendance, teacher and student morale, school

spirit, confidence of parents in the school, student and teacher self-image and self-esteem, and even curriculum and instruction. It results in the commitment of every one in the institution to be a winner and to produce winners. Positive school climate results from team effort of the teachers, students, parents and community. However, many studies (Coleman, 1983; Chapman & Lowther, 1982; Kelley, 1980, Ogilvie & Sadler, 1979; Gross & Herriott, 1965) have pointed out that the most critical contributing factor is the principal — he serves as the instructional leader, the motivator, and the moulder of the school climate

This study attempted to assess the situation in Singapore, and to examine the effect that school climate has on the morale of some Singapore teachers.

Methodology

Sample

The population for this study covered all the government secondary schools in Singapore where

1. the principal has been there as principal for at least two years; and
2. the student enrolment is or exceeds 1500.

Out of this population, an opportunity sample of six schools was selected. All the teachers in the six schools were approached to participate in this study. The sample size was 305.

Instrumentation

The Staff Morale Questionnaire (SMQ) by K.R. Smith was chosen to measure staff morale in this study. Its items distribute across three factors: Cohesive Pride, Personal Challenge and Leadership Synergy. These are defined as follows:

Cohesive Pride — This reflects the sense of cooperativeness, and describes a staff who feel that they are working together towards the school's objectives.

Personal Challenge — This represents the incentive derived from satisfaction in the school situation, and measures the degree to which a group actually utilizes its potentiality for freedom.

Leadership Synergy — This relates to the group energy generated and released among the

teachers by the school's leaders, and was seen as the most basic and important factor in morale.

The school climate was measured by the School-level Environment Questionnaire (SLEQ) designed by Rentoul & Fraser (1983). The three key dimensions in this instrument which are crucial for measuring human environment are the following:

Relationship — This assesses the extent to which people are involved in the environment, the extent to which they support and help one another, and the extent of spontaneity and free and open expression among teachers. The two subscales which come under this dimension are *Affiliation* and *Student Supportiveness*.

Personal Growth/Goal Orientation — This assesses the basic directions along which personal development and self enhancement tend to move in an environment, and is characterized by the subscales of *Professional Interest* and *Achievement Orientation*.

System Maintenance and Change — This evaluates the extent to which the environment is orderly, clear in its expectations, maintains control, and is responsive to change. The four subscales which measure this are *Formalization*, *Centralization*, *Innovativeness* and *Resource Adequacy*.

Findings

Pearson's product moment correlation was computed to check on the extent of the relationship between teacher morale and school climate. The data collected showed that the correlation between teacher morale and school climate in this study was 0.59 ($p < .01$). Table 1 presents the correlation matrix for the morale and climate subscales.

To determine which of the eight climate subscales had a significant contribution to make to teacher morale, multiple regression techniques were used. It was found that a total of 57% of the variance in teacher morale was explained by the eight climate subscales (Table 2).

However, this 57% of the variance was explained by just five climate subscales. These were *Professional Interest* (43%), followed by *Innovativeness* (8%), *Centralization* (3%), *Student Supportiveness* (2%) and *Resource Adequacy* (1%).

TABLE 1 — CORRELATION MATRIX OF SUBSCALES IN THE SMQ AND THE SLEQ.

| | CP | PC | LS | AF | SS | PI | AO | F | C | I |
|----|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|------|------|-----|
| PC | 0.3 | | | | | | | | | |
| LS | 0.5 | 0.4 | | | | | | | | |
| AF | 0.4 | 0.3 | 0.4 | | | | | | | |
| SS | 0.1 | 0.4 | 0.3 | 0.3 | | | | | | |
| PI | 0.6 | 0.4 | 0.5 | 0.6 | 0.2 | | | | | |
| AO | 0.2 | 0.3 | 0.1 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.2 | | | | |
| F | 0.2 | 0.1 | 0.03 | 0.1 | 0.0 | 0.2 | 0.3 | | | |
| C | -0.3 | -0.3 | -0.5 | -0.3 | -0.3 | -0.3 | -0.02 | 0.2 | | |
| I | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.6 | 0.5 | 0.3 | 0.7 | 0.2 | 0.07 | -0.4 | |
| RA | 0.4 | 0.3 | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.3 | 0.5 | 0.2 | 0.1 | -0.2 | 0.5 |

Legend: CP — Cohesive Pride AO — Achievement Orientation
PC — Professional Challenge F — Formalization
LS — Leadership Synergy C — Centralization
AF — Affiliation I — Innovativeness
SS — Student Supportiveness RA — Resource Adequacy
PI — Professional Interest

**TABLE 2 — MULTIPLE REGRESSION OF SCHOOL CLIMATE
SUBSCALES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO VARIANCE IN
TEACHER MORALE**

| Variable | R ² | R ² added | B value | F value |
|-------------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------|---------|
| Professional Interest | 0.4341 | — | 1.12 | 232.43 |
| Innovativeness | 0.5103 | 0.0762 | 0.79 | 157.33 |
| Centralization | 0.5446 | 0.0343 | 1.56 | 119.98 |
| Student Supportiveness | 0.5641 | 0.0195 | 1.29 | 97.04 |
| Resource Adequacy | 0.5759 | 0.0118 | 1.18 | 81.21 |
| Formalization | 0.5821 | 0.0062 | 1.08 | 69.17 |
| Achievement Orientation | 0.5832 | 0.0011 | 1.05 | 59.36 |
| Affiliation | 0.5841 | 0.0009 | 1.08 | 51.96 |

All F values are significant at the 0.001 level.

Discussion of Findings

It is undeniable that school climate plays a key role in shaping teacher morale. School leaders and administrators should therefore work towards an improvement of the school climate to enhance teacher morale, thereby increasing productivity and school effectiveness.

In a career such as teaching, professional development is crucial to prevent professional stagnation, and to provide renewal. In this study, it was found that *Professional Interest* explained the greatest amount of variance in climate (43%). Studies carried out by Chapman & Lowther (1982) and Coleman (1983) also stress the importance of injecting

Professional Interest into teachers so that they will constantly want to learn and introduce new instructional methods to better their teaching. Traditional methods can no longer suffice; in fact, they have become ineffective in teaching our new generation of students who are exposed to advanced and sophisticated technology.

It must also be mentioned that in Singapore, it is not uncommon to find principals reluctant and at times unwilling to release their good teachers to attend full-time courses, and having in their places inexperienced relief teachers. School leaders should be ready to make short-term sacrifices for long-term benefits, and

should take it upon themselves to encourage their staff to go for professional development.

An innovative school is one which is open to new ideas and receptive to progressive changes. The findings of this study indicated that *Innovativeness* explained the greatest amount of variance in teacher morale (after *Professional Interest*), accounting for 8% of the total variance. While the teachers were generally unanimous in agreeing that resources were adequate in their schools, it was the older teachers and the leaders who were most positive about this aspect of the school climate. It is heartening to note that the Ministry of Education is working towards giving schools more independence, an identity and pride, and a stronger sense of mission.

Centralization surfaced as one climate subscale which deserves special mention. After *Professional Interest* and *Innovativeness*, it explained the greatest amount of variance in teacher morale (3%). Previous attempts at examining factors causing low teacher morale have revealed a lack of consultation as one of the key factors. The *Report on the Ministry of Education* (1979) also recorded a lack of consultation as one reason causing low teacher morale. The importance of participative decision making (PDM) cannot be denied as it allows teachers to utilize their knowledge and skills. This increases their job satisfaction, enhances work achievement, and promotes loyalty and commitment to the school and its leaders. Those who feel a sense of challenge in their work and are given the autonomy to carry out their tasks are often the ones who feel adequately rewarded enough to stay on in the teaching profession.

Though *Formalization* did not appear to be very reliable in this study, findings in this subscale seemed to lend support to the contention that high job codification is desirable, but excessive supervision lowers morale (English, 1975; Hoy et al., 1977; Schwab, 1980). Increasingly, teachers are becoming more vocal in expressing and exercising their professional rights.

Several studies have pointed to the importance of *Relationship* in a profession such as teaching, where the cellular nature of the school organization restricts maximum interaction among colleagues (Rosenholtz & Smylie, 1984;

Coleman, 1983; Little, 1982; Willower et al., 1978). In this study, it was seen that the older teachers (and consequently those with longer school and teaching experience) and those holding administrative posts in the school registered higher average scores for *Cohesive Pride*, *Affiliation* and *Student Supportiveness*.

In all analyses of *Achievement Orientation*, no significant differences were found among teachers divided into different categories. This shows that the teachers in Singapore schools, regardless of their age, school experience, teaching experience and internal designations, were singular in their aim to produce good academic results. Again, this is expected because there is a great emphasis on academic excellence in Singapore.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study generated several implications. First and foremost, low morale must be recognized as a critical and detrimental condition which needs immediate attention if school climate is to be positive and constructive for both students and teachers. It goes without saying that higher morale leads to more effective instruction and improved student learning.

The problem of low teacher morale is further aggravated by the fact that Singapore is still very short of teachers, especially graduate teachers. Knowing the causes and factors which affect morale will help to bring about the necessary changes to encourage more to enter the profession, and once they are in, to want to stay on.

The results showed that for the subscale of *Centralization*, the older teachers expressed disturbingly low morale. While acknowledging the importance and benefits of participative decision making and the training of young blood to take over the reins of leadership in the school, some empathy should be directed to the older teachers who, though they have no academic qualifications to boast of, have put in many years of dedicated service to the school and to the profession. Care and tact must be exercised to see that their morale is not affected adversely as younger graduate teachers assume more responsibilities.

The study also indicated that the ordinary teachers preferred to have their duties spelt out

for them, but they resented excessive supervision as they regarded it as an intrusion into their professional autonomy. The *Report on the Ministry of Education* (1979) has previously found that one of the reasons teachers cited as contributing to their low morale was the many changes in educational policies implemented without any consultation with them. This appeared to reinforce the above finding that, more and more, teachers are demanding to be professionals in their own right. This would have implications for the implementation of future policies by the Ministry of Education.

What is crucial to note is that the findings of this study support the view that the facets of dissatisfaction and the factors causing low morale among the teachers are within the locus of control exercised by school administrators, and thus within their power to change. The more viable knowledge these administrators have about such factors, the more effectively they can function to uplift teacher morale and mitigate conditions which might tend to depress it.

Postscript

Modernization and sophisticated living has eroded, to a great extent, the traditional respect for the teacher. This is particularly so in the West where student discipline has deteriorated, and teacher burnout is a pressing problem. Here in Singapore, though the problem has not reached as great a magnitude, and the "guru" of the East is relatively respected, a grave shortage of teachers (especially graduate teachers) in recent years has necessitated an examination of the situation. If the profession is not attracting enough of the right people, then, invariably, our schools and our students will suffer. Teacher morale and school climate are crucial variables affecting the educational productivity in school. It is hoped that research in this area will provide important insights into the system of educational administration, and contribute towards improving the lot of the teachers. Once their morale is raised, and the school climate is conducive for teaching and learning, productivity will naturally increase.

This is vital for Singapore where manpower is the only resource, and at a time when we are all striving towards achieving excellence in education and for our nation.

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