

---

Title	The social organization of schools: A multi-level perspective
Author(s)	Ho Wah Kam
Source	<i>Singapore Journal of Education, 1988 (Special Issue), 1-3</i>
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

---

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

## The Social Organisation of Schools: A Multi-Level Perspective

Ho Wah Kam

The ten articles in this special issue of the *Singapore Journal of Education* were initially presented as papers, among a number of other research-based presentations, at the First Annual Conference of the local Educational Research Association on 5 and 6 September 1987 under the general theme of *Research In the Service of Educational Excellence*. Other papers not included in this issue, owing to a lack of space, dealt with research in language education, science education and teacher education as well as innovative approaches to teaching, which were presented under different sub-themes at the concurrent panel sessions. There was also a very stimulating panel-cum-workshop on Pupil Problem Predisposition, based on research data presented by Dr Sim Wong Kooi.

The principal objective of this Conference, which was to provide a forum for researchers in Singapore to present and discuss their work, was fully achieved. Additionally, with the active participation of a large number of senior staff from the schools, the Conference served as a crucial dissemination point for the research presented.

A special feature of this Conference was the participation of four scholars from the region, who are members of the Southeast Asian Research Review Advisory Group. Dr Minda Sutaria, Under Secretary for the Department of Education, Culture and Sports from the Republic of the Philippines, delivered the keynote address, while Dr Pote Sapianchai (Thailand), Dr Moegiadi (Indonesia) and Rev. Dr Ramon C. Salinas (Philippines) made

presentations on different topics under the rubric of Research on Asean Education. Dr Sutaria's keynote address on the theme of the Conference is included in this issue and is a fitting introduction to the nine articles which follow. The thrust of the keynote address is, in Dr Sutaria's own words, "The [research] message must lead to action", and drawing on her experience in the Philippines, she explained how the message from one research project was 'transformed' into successful action in the schools.

Since it is in the schools that the most fruitful action can take place, it was decided that instead of having a random selection of papers from the different panel sessions, this issue should focus on three of the sub-themes of the Conference, viz. *Principals' Leadership Behaviour*, *Teacher Morale and Job Satisfaction*, and *Pupil Self-Concept and Achievement*, under the general rubric of the Social Organisation of Schools. The nine papers presented under the three sub-themes were based on the master's dissertations of the respective authors, successfully completed in the last three years. Collectively the research reports constitute a rich data source on the social system of schools in Singapore.

In writing about schools as workplaces, Corwin and Borman (1988) refer to the three dimensions of work in schools as (a) the administrative context of work, (b) the occupational structure of teaching and (c) the classroom as a social system and work setting. This perspective may be described as *multi-level*, which according to Bossert (1988) has the

advantage of shifting "the focus of research on organisational outcomes away from the morphology of the school to the production processes themselves" Corwin and Borman's characterisation of the school's social system aptly covers the three sub-themes that together serve as a useful conceptual framework for the collection of articles in this issue.

Despite the fact that the sub-themes appear to deal with differentiated organisational levels, the main focus is really on the *productive* processes in a school and how they fit into the larger pattern of things. As Barr and Dreeben (1983) have noted in their important study of how schools work, "It would be a strange organisation indeed if the parts were hermetically sealed off from each other; if, for example, what the *principal* did had no bearing on what *teachers* did and if what teachers did made no difference for what *students* did and learned. Yet it is precisely the failure to come up with satisfactory answers to these questions that has caused so much grief in our understanding of educational effects. The answer must come from identifying correctly what the activities are and from being able to trace their antecedents and effects across pathways that connect one level to another" (*italics added*).

In different ways, the nine articles do try "to trace their antecedents and effects", as Barr and Dreeben have put it. And when the articles are read together, the point seems clear that productive events can take place at different levels of a school organisation (Barr and Dreeben). Each article, in turn, draws attention to the implications for *linkages* between levels.

The thrust of each article is described briefly here. At the level of *principals*, Lim Soon Tze (p. 9) set out to determine whether the most effective principals have personality traits and leadership behaviour patterns different from those of principals judged to be less effective, while Ee Chye Heng (p. 18) examined the relationship between the educational attitudes of teachers and their perceptions of the leadership behaviour of their principals. Mok Siew Ming (p. 23), in examining the extent of *conflict and ambiguity* the principal faces in his role, confronted the question of whether the principal is able to match his actual performance of tasks with his own aspiration (i.e. desired per-

formance) as well as the expectations of school inspectors. Mok Siew Ming found that principals in the sample experienced ambiguity in the 'major areas of their work', and that there were statistically significant differences in the same principals' perceptions of the importance of their tasks in relation to their *actual, ideal* and *expected* roles.

At the level of *teachers*, Cheong Heng Yuen (p. 30) examined the job satisfaction of a sample of teachers in relation to the principals' leadership behaviour, defined by two critical dimensions, viz. *consideration* and *initiating structure*. On the major research question, the finding was that teachers who regarded their principals as being 'high in consideration and initiating structure' were more satisfied with their jobs than those who saw their principals as being low on the same dimensions. The motivation of teachers and their commitment to the profession should constitute another important area of study, and so Lim Han Soon nee Goh (p. 36), using theoretical principles developed by Herzberg and a questionnaire she adapted, successfully identified different groups of teachers (e.g. 'high motivation seekers' and 'low motivation seekers') who clearly showed different levels of professional commitment. The important variable of teacher morale was studied next by Ruth Wong Yeang Lam (p. 41), and correlated with school climate. On the whole, teachers' responses on the school climate sub-scales were found to be able to predict fairly well the levels of teacher morale.

Much work concerning the productivity of schools has been done at the level of *pupils*. A large number of factors have been studied, among which is the nature of the learning environment, which has been used either as an independent or dependent variable. Using this factor as an independent variable, the two studies by Daulath Tajuddin (p. 46) and Ng Gek Tiang (p. 52) make a useful distinction between *classroom-level* environment and *school-level* environment, each of which would involve relationships, interactions and perceptions at a different level of the school organisation. Classroom environment was one of three major variables studied by Daulath Tajuddin in her research, the other two being academic self-concept and academic achievement.

While the relative effect of a school's social climate was a major factor of interest in Ng Gek Tiang's study, she also investigated the relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement. In the context of these two studies (Daulath Tajuddin and Ng Gek Tiang's), both of which used Brookover's (1979) Self-Concept of Academic Ability Scale, the term 'academic self-concept' refers to those beliefs that subjects had about themselves as learners in school settings, and it was assumed that a pupil's attainment at school could well benefit from the improvement of his or her academic self-concept. In turn, taking a completely different setting, Khoo Pee Ying (p. 56) examined the relationship between the self-concept (measured by another instrument) of polytechnic students and their academic achievement. She found a positive and statistically significant correlation ( $r=0.23$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) between self-concept and achievement; so did Daulath Tajuddin and Ng Gek Tiang in their separate studies based in primary schools, which reported correlations by school ranging from 0.18 to 0.49, which suggested that school membership would make a difference to the extent of the relationships.

The nine studies reported on here were conducted in the empirical tradition, using largely statistical tools to capture, objectify, understand and explain the phenomena observed. They certainly represent a fruitful line of inquiry, underscoring a certain logic and coherence in the way the phenomena have been analysed and explained. And it is also to the credit of the authors that in each case implications for practice have been systematically teased out. The linkage between ideas and practice is therefore carefully established.

This *multi-level* perspective of a school's social organisation and the *linkages* between the organisational levels should lend further support to lines of inquiry that try to examine the interdependencies within a school that help shape the performance of teachers and the achievement of pupils. Despite the 'loosely-coupled' concept as applied to schools, it seems logical to suggest that in assessing the *total productivity* of a school, one should take into account all the productive events that occur at each level of a school organisation, which

*cumulatively* should have a strong impact on pupil achievement.

The articles are complementary in many ways, and should be read and discussed. Collectively they reflect the variety of research that has been completed on topics related to the organisation of schools. As I have said on another occasion in the *Singapore Journal of Education*, with particular reference to language education research in Singapore, much of this work remains to be systematically disseminated and used. Utilization is crucial. Dr Sutaria made a similar assertion in her keynote address when she said, "To put research in the service of educational excellence, it is imperative to emphasize not just the conduct of research but its utilization as well." For this reason, readers are encouraged to read the dissertations, deposited in the Institute of Education Library, for the richness of detail in terms of data and argument.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the authors for their contributions and also for their kind and very constructive responses to editorial suggestions. It was a pleasure working with them.

---

#### REFERENCES

- Barr, R. & Dreeben, R. (1983), *How Schools Work*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bossert, S.T. (1988) School effects. In Norman Boyan (ed), *Handbook of Research On Educational Administration*. N.Y.: Longman.
- Brookover, W.B. et al. (1979). *School Social Systems and Student Achievement*. N.Y.: Praeger Publishers
- Coswin, R.G. & Borman, K.M. (1988). School as workplace: Structural constraints on administration. In Norman Boyan (ed), *Handbook of Research On Educational Administration*. N.Y.: Longman.
-