



Towards a model for research on the effects of school organizational health factors on primary school performance in Trinidad & Tobago

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a model for research on the effects of school organizational health factors on primary school academic achievement in Trinidad and Tobago. The model can be applicable for evaluating schools in other developing countries. As proposed, the model hypothesizes relationships between external factors (exogenous variables), school-level factors (endogenous variables), and school outcomes (student achievement and positive school climate). The endogenous variables are sub-scales of school organizational health. They include principal leadership, psycho-social environment, school–home–community relationships, teacher characteristics, curriculum quality, and school culture. These subscales are partially influenced by the Organizational Health Inventory OHI (Hoy and Feldman, 1987) and by school health indices set forth by the World Health Organization (1996). It is hoped that this school organizational health model can provide a conceptual tool for formulating a more comprehensive measure of healthy schools.

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1. Introduction

There is an increasing emphasis on the importance of healthy school environments for principals, teachers and students. The school through the quality of its classroom physical and social environment, its teaching and learning processes, and its interaction with its families and communities, has a direct influence on the well-being of its pupils and staff (Blum, 2005; Hoy et al., 1991; Hoy and Hannum, 1997; Marzano, 2007; Tanner, 2009). School leaders therefore have a responsibility to make schools healthy organizations. Some schools exhibit healthy characteristics such as positive teacher relations, a sense of belonging, supportive climate, and high academic standards. Other schools, however, are viewed as unhealthy with poor teacher motivation, poor leadership, student indiscipline and low levels of achievement.

This article proposes a model that can be employed to stimulate a programme of research on the effects of school organizational health on elementary school performance in Trinidad & Tobago, and in other developing countries that seek to transform poor performing schools. Bidwell (2001) has examined schools as organizations, pointing to their bureaucratic structure, the constraints under which they function, the social control of the work of teachers, and their production role—their responsibility for cognitive and moral development. If the health of the school as an

organization is bad, the primary symptom will be poor academic achievement. Some scholars as well as the World Health Organization speak simply of “school health” when they examine school conditions. When they do so their meaning and intent are the same as when others speak of “school organizational health”. In this article “school health” and “school organizational health” are equivalent terms and of equivalent meaning.

2. Background/context

Trinidad and Tobago, the most southerly of the Caribbean islands, is a twin island state. The country, after five centuries of foreign domination, gained its independence from Britain in 1962 and became a democratic republic in 1976. The islands still possess a British-oriented model of bureaucracy, which is reflected in the education system. The primary school system is a centralised one, whereby all schools are governed by a central authority headed by a Minister of Education, who is responsible for the administration of education at all levels. The Minister is assisted by a Permanent Secretary, a Chief Education Officer and other technical directors. Primary schools in the country have their roots in the mid-nineteenth century. During this period, the intense rivalry between the state and church, led to both church-controlled and state-controlled schools. In this ‘dual arrangement’, the church-run or denominational schools exercised power in the on-site management of their schools and in the appointment of personnel (Mackenzie, 1991). To this day, the ‘dual’ system is still a central feature of our education system, with the government-assisted or denominational schools having an input in the appointment,

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promotion and transfer of principals and teachers (Minister of Education, 1960).¹ Mackenzie (1991) has offered an account of denominational schooling in Trinidad and Tobago, pointing out that historically the relationship between church and state systems of education in the country and wider Caribbean has been stable.

At present, there are approximately 454 public primary schools in eight educational divisions in Trinidad and Tobago. Of these 322 are denominational and 132 are government. Primary schooling is compulsory from age 6 to 14, but children are admitted at age five and may remain enrolled until 15 unless selected for secondary schooling at 11+ (or 10). The transition from primary to secondary school is largely determined by performance at the Secondary Entrance Assessment. Students at 11+ are examined in two subject areas, Mathematics and Language Arts, the results of which determine whether students are placed in schools of their choice or at the discretion of the Ministry of Education.

The present system of selection of students to secondary schools through the SEA is viewed in some quarters as the root cause for many of the problems in the primary school. Much of the teaching and learning experiences and organization of schooling are oriented towards preparing for the SEA exam. Constant drills and “extra lessons” tend to replace non-examinable subjects such as Physical Education, Creative Arts and Social studies. The students who obtain the highest scores in the SEA exam (the first 20%) are allowed to attend the school of their choice. These schools are usually the seven-year denominational (government-assisted) secondary schools and to a lesser extent, government five and seven year schools. An additional 20% of the students, based on some agreed cut-off point, are selected by the government assisted secondary school principals. Their criteria for selection may involve religious affiliation or a student's relation to a past or present student at the school (Minister of Education, 1960). Most of the remaining students are placed in government secondary schools that are comprehensive in nature.

The SEA examination results have created a hierarchy of primary schools, and the national tendency is to see “good schools” in terms of the number of secondary school placements they attain, where students gain entrance to the school of their first choice based on the SEA results. There are indeed “prestige primary schools” where parents and teachers expect the students to pass for “prestige secondary schools”, typically those run by the denominations.

Although millions of dollars have been invested in the education sector, the learning outcomes of students leave much to be desired. Statistics for SEA show that annually, between 10.3 and 13.5% of pupils score 30% or less at this exam (Ministry of Education, Trinidad and Tobago, 2008). More recently, some 100 primary schools have been identified as ‘low-performing’ based on students' scores of less than 30% on the SEA. These schools have been targeted for the Performance Enhancement Programme (PEP) in which teachers would be trained in teaching strategies to counteract identified areas of weakness.

The physical and social conditions of many primary schools still do not facilitate the teaching and learning process (Ministry of

Education, Trinidad and Tobago, 1994). Primary school buildings vary severely in quality. Over the years, the focus on the expansion of the secondary level has been at the cost of the neglect of the primary sector. In addition to concerns of inadequate facilities, there are increasing problems of vandalism, robberies, and violence in our schools. Some schools are labelled “high-risk” because of their locale. A study on delinquency in schools (Deosaran, 2004) identified an alarming increase in student delinquent behaviour such as bullying, truancy, verbal abuse, fighting, and disrespect of teachers.

There is also increasing concern across schools about poor parental participation especially in low performing schools. The President of the Trinidad and Tobago National Parent Teachers' Association (2010) cited many incidents of school–parent relationships marked by hostility and lack of trust. She stressed the need to foster positive home–school partnerships, lamenting that many principals view the PTA as primarily a fundraising agency and not as a means of empowering parents. In this respect, the NPTA has initiated programs on literacy, communication and problem-solving skills for parents and has established homework centers in a number of school districts.

Another challenge for our primary schools is the lack of guidance officers to assist teachers with students' social and emotional problems. In the past, the focus used to be on prevention and management of auditory and visual impairment (Ministry of Education, Trinidad and Tobago, 2008). The increasing diversity of our student population and changing family demographics mean that many students are in need of a wider variety of academic and behavioural programs, services and supports to succeed. According to Maharajh and Konings (2005), no means of comprehensive assessment of physical and mental disabilities of children exist at schools in Trinidad and Tobago. Students are identified for disabilities only when these are indirectly brought to the attention of their teachers through poor academic performance or abnormal behaviour.

In Trinidad & Tobago, Jules and Kutnick (1990) have found that the type of school attended, its locality, school district and managing authority are all significant indicators of school success. Logie (1989) found that the strongest indicators of high student expectations and achievement in our schools were teaching practices, teacher attitudes and the environment that teachers create in the classroom. As indicated earlier in this article, the effectiveness of schools in Trinidad and Tobago often depends on whether they are run by the government or by the religious denominations. These latter schools have traditions into which teachers fall. Accordingly primary schools in the country are of uneven quality. While there are high performing schools, too many are beset with problems the consequence of which is poor student performance.

The conditions alluded to above, such as over-emphasis on examination preparedness, poor facilities, lack of support services for students and teachers, and low parental involvement, are suggestive of failing school organizational health. The aim of the article is to devise a model that would facilitate inquiry into the effects of school organizational health on primary school performance in the country. The model would have applicability beyond Trinidad and Tobago, since many of the variables upon which it draws have been employed in studies elsewhere, and since many of the reasons why schools fail are universal. It is the case though that there are local cultural factors that will inform its structure.

3. Meaning of school organizational health

School organizational health is a metaphor that is employed to capture the tone of a school (Tsui and Cheng, 1999). A healthy school is likely to be an effective school, one which conducts all of

¹ The Concordat of 1960 states in section 4 that “the right of appointment, retention, promotion, transfer and dismissal of teachers in the primary school rest with the Public Service Commission. A teacher shall not be appointed to a school if the board objects to such an appointment on moral or religious grounds. Similarly if a teacher be found unsatisfactory on these very grounds, moral or religious, the denominational authority shall have the right to request his removal to another school after due investigation. For these reasons it is proposed (provided the legal and constitutional arrangements allow) “that vacancies as they occur in all schools should be advertised and applications submitted in the first instance to the respective Boards of management which will examine them and forward them all, with their recommendations, to the Public Service Commission for final action.”

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