Chapter 11

School Culture, Effectiveness and Low SES in Trinidad:
A Multiple Case Study Diagnosis of an Excelling, a Mostly Effective, and an Underperforming Primary School

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a cultural diagnosis of three schools of differing effectiveness states – 'excelling', 'mostly effective' and 'under academic watch' within Trinidad, which face socio-economic challenges. It utilizes a multi-method, multiple case study approach and presents an adapted conceptualization of school culture, which is used as an analytical framework to diagnose the professional orientation of teachers within the cultures of the participating schools. Findings reveal that teachers' professional orientation, particularly their dispositions and psychological states, are critically important to many aspects of schooling, including students' orientations and their academic performance and achievement.

INTRODUCTION

School culture has been studied from as early as the 1960s (Prosser, 1999), often as a pre-requirement to understanding some other school-level phenomenon or with the aim of examining its effects on school effectiveness (Maslowski, 2006; Pol et al., 2005; Rossman, Corbett, & Firestone, 1988). Few studies (Caesar, 2007) explore school culture for the purpose of understanding the system/phenomenon itself (Pol et al., 2005). Currently, many of the studies conducted on school culture originate in developed countries, such as the UK and USA. While such research has been instrumental in guiding governments, including that of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) on educational change (Jansen, 2009), there is need for context-specific inquiries that can guide school reform locally.

This chapter presents a cultural diagnosis of three schools of differing effectiveness states – 'excelling', 'mostly effective' and 'under academic watch' within Trinidad, facing socio-economic challenges. This discussion follows a brief overview of the schools' contexts set against the backdrop of T&T's public primary school context. However, while highlighting the importance of school culture to school improvement, the chapter will also note the incredible potential of a school's culture to work for or against school improvement and reform (Barth, 2001). Consequently, the chapter will not only discuss school members' normative behaviors and the how and why of those actions, but also identify the cultural elements requiring the attention of school principals. In closing, the chapter will highlight a number of implications of the findings.

PRIMARY SCHOOLING IN T&T

T&T is a twin-island republic of 1.3 million people for which compulsory education and indeed functional literacy is considered to have been acquired by the end of primary school. From its beginnings, education in Trinidad engendered race and class prejudices incited by competitiveness (Campbell, 1992), resulting in a highly stratified system. Today, T&T's primary education sector consists of two categories of schools: public and private. Public schools refer to government and denominational schools which are free to attendees. Conversely, fees are applied for private school attendance. The study reported in this chapter focused on primary schools within the public domain.

There are 137 government primary schools and 339 government-assisted or denominational schools (2011 data), according to the Ministry of Education (MOE) (Strategic Plan: 2011-2015). Public primary schools are of varying sizes in terms of their student populations, with some schools having just under 100 students, whilst others may have on roll more than 700 students. The acceptable teacher-student ratio is currently 1:20 for Infants 1 and 2; while for standards 1 to 5, the ratio is 1:25. Currently, the national average is 1:17 (Strategic Plan: 2011-2015). The sector is comprised of single-sexed schools and co-educational ones, managed at the school level by school principals and school-based management (SBM) teams who may work with local school boards or denominational boards but are accountable to the centralized, state-run MOE.

Public primary education is provided full-time to children aged 5 to 11+ years, but the system caters for late starters and class-level repeaters up to age 14. Primary students start in *Infants year 1*, the equivalent of *Reception* of the English school system and *Kindergarten* of the American system. Seven years of primary schooling is completed at the end of Standard 5 (Year 6 of the English System and Grade 5 of the American System). Standard 5 culminates with the sitting of the Secondary Entrance Assessment Examination (SEA), formerly Common Entrance Examination, to determine placement in secondary schools – a highly competitive and meritocratic process. Only those students passing the examination can be placed usually in one of four secondary schools of their choice. However, students may be placed in schools not listed as a choice. Presently, students not meeting the standards are required to re-sit the final examination, which means repeating the class level. Apart from the SEA, primary school students are required to write National Tests.

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