



SMALL SCHOOLS IN RURAL SETTINGS: IMPACT OF A MULTI-SCHOOL MANAGEMENT APPROACH ON PUPILS, STAFF AND PARENTS

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ABSTRACT

Keeping schools open in small or remote communities is a major challenge. Short of transporting children out of their community to larger ones, effective cost-reduction measures are required. One approach is multi-school management, where one individual is the acting director (or principal) for two or more schools. The aim of this paper is to present the results of an empirical study of the perceived impact of this approach. A total of 18 elementary schools (6 with a single director and 12 with multi-school directors) were included in the study, generating 4 samples: 18 directors; 182 teachers; 1235 pupils; 1598 parents. All participants filled out a questionnaire aimed at evaluating school climate, overall satisfaction, communication, school achievement, problem behaviours and organizational climate. Results indicated that parents are the ones who react the most negatively to a multi-school management approach.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous small communities are faced with dire demographic and financial constraints which directly impact educational resources made available locally (Howley, & Bickel, 2000). In most cases, public schools are funded by the state through rather large organizations known as school boards or councils, which are responsible for the allocation of resources on specific territories. In the case of outlying communities or small villages included in larger school boards, the issue of cost-effectiveness is now of paramount importance. Short of closing small scale schools and transporting children out of their community to larger ones, few alternatives appear to be practical and effective when cost-reduction measures need to be implemented.

Two approaches have thus been used: a) multi-grade classrooms, in which children of different age groups and abilities are regrouped; b) multi-school management, in which one individual is the acting director or principal for two or three schools. Many papers have been written about multi-grade classrooms but available literature is more than scarce when it comes to multi-school management.

Merging autonomous service units under the stewardship of one direction is by no means an innovation. In the public sector, this type of organizational setting is often encountered in medical and social services. Generally speaking, this is done when services must be maintained or offered to smaller communities which do not have a sufficient critical mass to justify a complete service unit. In the private sector, such problems are usually dealt with through selective closures and distribution networks management. However, the public sector has a mandate of uniform service delivery which forces management to cope with a complex network of constraints such as equitable regional coverage, small or decreasing populations, budget cuts and so forth (Darling-Hammond, Milliken, & Ross, 2006).

One of the solutions chosen by many school boards is to maintain small individual schools by merging administrative services, thus placing two or more schools under the responsibility of



one school director. From an organizational viewpoint, this is referred to as a multi-site single direction organization. Cost-reductions are possible through the sharing of resources while trying to maintain the essential required services for the population. The financial implications of this organizational setting are well known since budget considerations are at the root of its inception. However, very little is known about the human impacts of this approach, especially in school settings.

Related research has documented the differences between smaller and larger schools (Cotton, 1996; 2001; Raywid, 1997; Wasley, Powell, Mosak, King, Holland, Gladden, & Fine, 2000) as well as organizational constraints of large schools which need to branch out to cope with growing populations (Duke, DeRoberto, & Trautvetter, 2009; Sicoli, 2000). To our knowledge, the only published research dealing specifically with multi-school management was centered on the administrative competency of multi-school directors (Carr, 1987). Results indicated that administrative competencies were similar in directors of single and multi-schools, the main difference being a problem of time management, especially in staff supervision related issues.

On a similar note, Sheridan (1974) reported that there needs to be a clear and common understanding of the respective roles and functions of the school staff and director in order to enhance school effectiveness, findings which were echoed by Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate (2008). This is a major challenge in multi-school management settings simply because of the numbers involved. Clearly, school authorities and directors cannot rely on a substantive body of knowledge to guide their actions and decisions when various constraints require them to manage more than one school in a system which was more or less built within a single school/director framework.

Consequently, the aims of this research were to compare the perceptions of students, parents, teachers and directors of traditional grade schools managed by one director and multi-school managed establishments, where one director manages two or more schools on a shared time basis and to determine if differences in terms of school achievement were apparent between settings.

The specific research questions which will be investigated are as follows:

- 1- Do students perceive the quality of the social school climate differently from one setting to the other?
- 2- Do parents perceive the quality of the school program, the response to their children's needs and the communication with the school authorities differently from one setting to the other?
- 3- Do teachers perceive the quality of the organizational climate differently from one setting to the other?
- 4- Do directors perceive the quality of the organizational climate and the overall workload differently from one setting to the other?
- 5- Do school performance and achievement vary across settings?



METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This research was conducted in 2010 and 2011 across several small communities in rural and semi-rural environments in the province of Quebec (Canada). A total of 18 elementary schools took part in the study, generating 4 samples: 18 directors or principals; 182 teachers; 1235 pupils; 1598 parents.

Table 1: Population and sample

Categories	N	Single-school setting	Multi-school setting
Schools	18	12	5
Students	1235	819	416
Parents	1598	1089	509
Teachers	182	145	37
Directors	18	13	5

All participants filled out a questionnaire aimed at evaluating school climate, overall satisfaction, communication, school achievement, and organizational climate. Each questionnaire was adapted to the characteristics of respective samples and included a combination of Likert scale items (such as *I am satisfied with the education my child receives at this school*) and short open-ended questions (such as *How many times a month do you hold staff meetings*). A face validity procedure was used to assess the quality of the instruments which were created specifically for this research.

Questionnaires were distributed to teachers, directors and pupils in each of the schools included in the study. Parents received their questionnaire in envelopes brought home and returned to school by the children. Overall rates of participation were very high: 78% of the questionnaires were returned. School achievement was measured by using raw data produced by the information systems of each school. Parametric and non-parametric analyses were used to compare perceptions between comparably sized elementary schools according to the management approach: single school direction or multi-school direction.

RESULTS

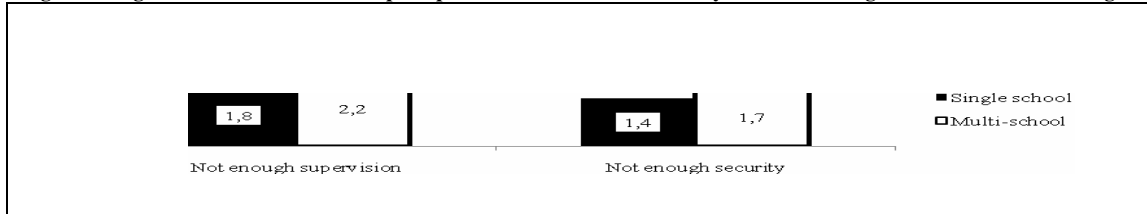
Results will be presented in sequence with reference to each of the research questions.

1. Do students perceive the quality of the social school climate differently from one setting to the other?

A total of 20 different items or indicators were used to measure the students' perception of the school social climate in a variety of domains: support from staff, safety, discipline, sense of security, friendliness of staff and peers etc. Of all these, only two items generated a significant between settings difference (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 : Significant¹ differences in the perception of school social climate by students in single and multi-school settings



¹T-test with Bonferroni correction; p<.05

Children in multi-school managed settings reported a significantly higher perception that there is not enough security or supervision in the school environment, compared to their peers in single schools.

2. Do parents perceive the quality of the school program, the response to their children’s needs and the communication with the school authorities differently from one setting to the other?

A total of 46 different items or indicators were used to measure the parents’ perception of the quality of the school program, the response to their children’s needs and the communication with the school authorities etc. The majority of items (i.e. 29 out of 46) generated significant between settings differences (see Table 2).

Table 2 : Significant¹ differences in the perception of school quality by parents in single and multi-school settings

Indicators	Mul ti	Sing le	Indicators	Mul ti	Sin gle
The director knows the students		+ ²	I am satisfied with the education my child gets in this school		+
Communications are fluid		+	My child feels secure in this school		+
It was easy to meet the director		+	Staff listen to children’s problems		+
My questions are answered quickly		+	The school is clean		+
The staff seems motivated		+	School rules are clear for the children		+
Parental implication is sought		+	My child gets enough help for his homework		+
There are enough teacher/parents meetings		+	My child will succeed in grade school		+
In this school, problems are quickly solved		+	Disciplinary rules are clearly spelled out		+
This is a good school for my child		+	School discipline is applied fairly in this school		+
My child is well supervised		+	I feel welcome in my child’s school		+
This school often changes its procedures	+		I am satisfied with the answers i get when i have questions		+
The director has leadership		+	The school calls me when my child does not behave		+
Projects are often delayed	+		I was informed of this year’s curriculum		+
My child likes his school		+	The director makes its presence felt in the school		+
Teachers discipline the children		+			

¹T-test with Bonferroni correction; p<.05



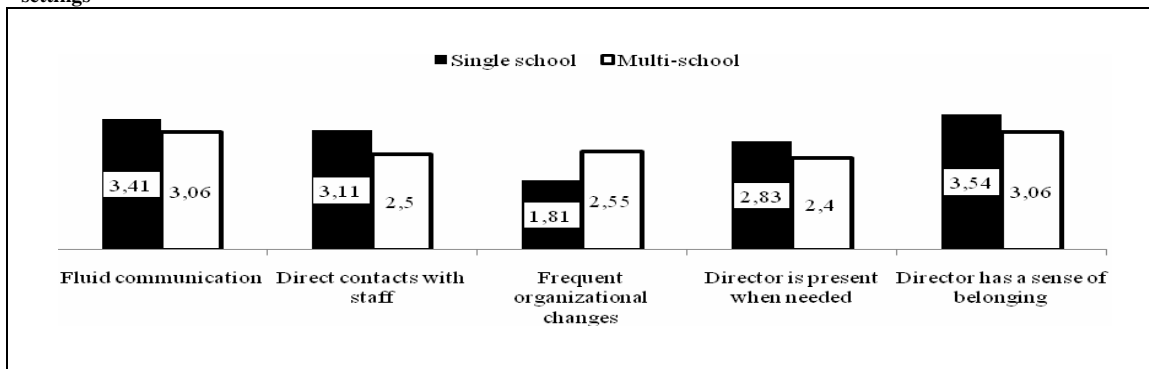
²Indicates which setting has the highest mean score

These results indicate that multi-school managed establishments are globally much less appreciated than traditional single schools with one director. This negative perception affects various areas of the school environment, program and quality.

3. Do teachers perceive the quality of the organizational climate differently from one setting to the other?

A total of 50 different items or indicators were used to measure the staff's perception of the organizational climate. Of all these, only five items generated a significant between settings difference (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 : Significant¹ differences in the perception of school organizational climate by staff in single and multi-school settings



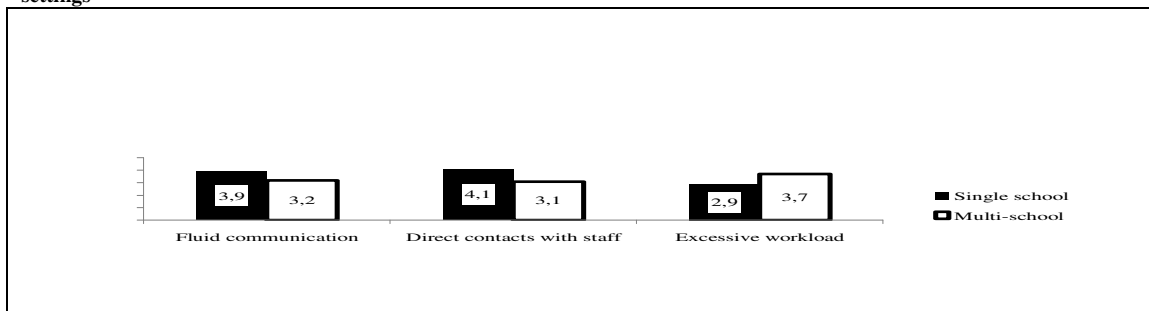
¹T-test with Bonferroni correction; p<.05

Again, the majority of significant differences related to positive indicators were found in the single school setting. Multi-school settings were perceived as generating more frequent organizational changes.

4. Do directors perceive the quality of the organizational climate and the overall workload differently from one setting to the other?

A total of 50 different items or indicators were used to measure the directors' perceptions of the organizational climate and the overall workload. Only three items generated a significant between settings difference (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 : Significant¹ differences in the perception of school organizational climate by directors in single and multi-school settings



¹Mann-Whitney U-test; p<.05

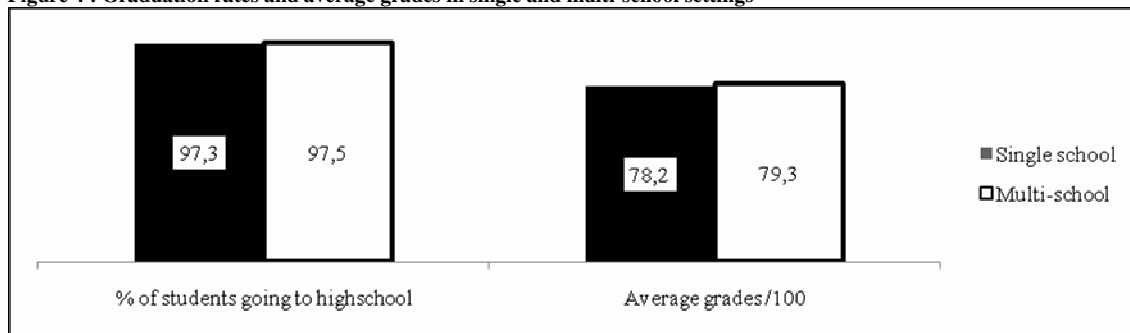


Two significant differences related to positive indicators regarding communication were found in the single school setting. Multi-school settings were more perceived as generating an excessive workload.

5. Do school performance and achievement vary across settings?

School performance and achievement were measured using two indicators: a) the percentage of pupils from each school which successfully make the transition from elementary school to highschool; b) the equivalent of the overall average GPA score (Grade Point Average) in each school, computed on a 100 points scale (See Figure 4). A simple mathematical and graphic comparison indicated that both achievement and performance were similar across settings.

Figure 4 : Graduation rates and average grades in single and multi-school settings



CONCLUSION

The aims of this research were to compare the perceptions of students, parents, teachers and directors of traditional grade schools managed by one director and multi-school managed establishments, where one director manages two or more schools on a shared time basis and to determine if differences in terms of school achievement were apparent between settings. For the majority of stakeholders, except parents, perceived differences between both settings are scarce but significant.

For pupils, multi-school settings appear to generate safety and security issues probably because the majority of incidents involving student safety or security (injuries, scuffles, bullying) are dealt with by the school director or principal. This could indicate that multi-school management requires changes at the first response level for these types of problems which cannot be put on hold because the person in charge of solving them is present only half of the time.

Parents appear to have an overall negative perception of multi-school management. The logical explanation for these surprising results could be linked to halo effects. Since the decision of sharing administrative staff such as directors between schools is usually preceded by budget problems and hypothetical school closures, this management approach could be viewed by parents as a last resort, the backdrop of which being construed as a loss of resources or services, rather than an organizational measure enabling small communities to maintain schools in their midst. Parents could then hold a dim view of multi-managed schools which does not appear to be shared by pupils, teachers and directors nor supported by evidence regarding school performance and achievement. Multi-school management should include better communication



patterns with parents in order to clearly establish the fact that their children will not be disadvantaged in terms of school achievement, programs, and support when compared with children from traditional schools.

Directors and teaching staff in single schools report higher scores on items dealing with availability, presence, and communication with the director, which are all rooted in the delicate issue of time management and priorities for directors which have to manage two or three schools. It must be noted that the increased workload of multi-school directors has not been systematically compensated by a reorganization of their responsibilities on each site. This situation is characteristic of organizations facing new challenges with a “more of the same” approach, as if managing two schools meant a director simply had to put in more hours.

The higher dissatisfaction levels in multi-school settings with the frequency of changes and the relative instability of the organization also indicate that a shift in management approaches is required to correct this problem. This in turn generates a basic hen and egg problem: job descriptions and responsibilities of directors are identical in single and multi-school settings because work agreements, unions and senior management mostly deal with single schools; therefore procedures, rules and responsibilities simply do not address the problems and realities encountered in multi-school settings. This in turn generates difficult working conditions for directors and a very high turnover rate, most principals leaving multi-school assignments after two or three years.

All things considered, it is quite an achievement to manage complex organizations such as multi-schools without impacting negatively the pupils’ performance and achievement. Still, a human price is paid by directors, parents, and students which are diversely affected by the ripple effects of an organizational change which does not rest on an appropriate organizational structure.

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