

## 8 Teachers and Schools

One objective of this study is to assess how far there are differences in outcomes of various kinds produced by different schools. A second objective is to make progress towards finding explanations of any such differences. In looking for these explanations, we decided to focus on the school as an organisation: on structures, policies and practices. There were three reasons for adopting this approach. First, educational research has tended to concentrate on the details of interactions between teachers and children but to ignore the problem of creating the kind of organisation in which the interactions that are wished for are likely to take place. Second, conclusions about structures, policies or practices at the school or departmental level are more likely to be capable of being translated into action than conclusions about the minutiae of classroom interactions. Thirdly, we did not have the resources within this project to carry out a proper study of classroom interactions. Indeed, we found that we did not even have the capacity for classroom observations to help us describe the subject matter covered in lessons. Furthermore, this limitation is inevitable within a study that aims to analyse school differences. Any such study needs to cover a considerable number of schools (our sample of 20 is not really big enough). No research budget would be able to support intensive classroom observation in a large number of schools.

For these reasons, we decided to try to develop within this study a method of describing those aspects of the structure, policies and practices of the schools that might, we thought, be important in determining outcomes. Since a description of the formal structures

would be grossly inadequate on its own, this information could only come from questioning teachers. This we tried to do through self-completion questionnaires.

For reasons discussed in Chapter 4, the response rate was low (34 per cent overall) and extremely variable between schools, so that in the event very little information was produced about certain schools. In addition, information from questionnaires addressed to teachers with specific functions (such as departmental heads or those with pastoral responsibilities) was incomplete in all schools. Consequently, the results cannot be used to explain differences in outcomes between the schools.

Because of these serious shortcomings, the results will not be described, but the experience suggests that this line of research needs to be pursued. Although the information is highly incomplete, it is clear that there are very large differences between schools in their styles of organisation, in the extent and nature of discussion among teachers about curriculum and policy matters, in the rate of change they have experienced, and in the way they have dealt with change.

On the basis of this experience, we believe that the key to progress in understanding secondary schools is the study of the structure and dynamics of school organisations, and of management methods at the level of the school, the subject departments and the units of pastoral care. This kind of research can best be carried out by using the survey method to collect both facts and opinions from teachers. The facts about an organisation are complex; what can be established from interviews with a few members of the senior staff, and from documents, is limited in scope and biased towards the perspective of senior managers. A great deal more can be established from questionnaires completed by all staff.

As explained in Chapter 4, there was a combination of factors that made it extremely difficult to obtain the full cooperation of teachers within the present study. Contraction associated with demographic changes and public expenditure cuts had led to low teacher morale, strained relations with management, and industrial action of various kinds. The profession is highly sensitive to accusations of racial prejudice, so the subject matter of the present study made it seem dangerous.

However, none of these difficulties is eternal. The experience of this project confirms that study of school organisation, policies and practices through teacher questionnaires should be a central element of future attempts to explain differences in outcomes between schools.