

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Background of the Study**

This case study was undertaken to identify factors which influenced the academic achievement of Standard VI pupils of the National-Type Primary Tamil School, Sungai Rengam (PTSSR) in the Petaling District of Selangor Darul Ehsan. In addition, it was to establish the relationship between these factors and the academic achievement of Tamil primary pupils in Sungai Renggam.

Factors such as socio-economic status (SES), peer influence, teacher characteristics, and school organization, facilities and climate which affect student learning have received the attention of educators, sociologists and economists. However, interest in the factors influencing academic achievement increased considerably following the publication of Coleman's (1966) study on Equality of Educational Opportunity.

The importance of SES and other background factors and their relationship with academic achievement has long been recognized. Studies have been conducted to explain the complex set of relationships between SES and background variables and academic achievement. While the dimensions of this concept varies between studies, it is generally accepted that SES comprises the educational attainment, and the occupation and income of fathers and the possession of material items such as a car, television and a house. Hammond and Cox (1967), Averch (1971), Keesee (1972), Majoribanks (1979), Simmons and Alexander (1980), Muller and Parcel (1981), Schiefelbein and Simmons (1981), Noell (1982), Mercy and Steelman (1982), and Holloway and others (1990) found that SES background accounted for a substantial proportion of the total variance in academic achievement. In the developed countries, it can be said that most of the variance in academic achievement was accounted for by the educational and occupational status of pupils' fathers .

However, the results of studies of SES on educational achievement in the less developed countries differ from those in the industrialized nations. Comparatively, the findings are not as consistent and the relationship between SES and academic achievement is weaker. Of the few studies carried out, some have reported a low correlation (Murphree, 1973 and Schiefelbein, 1973) while others have found, in fact, a negative correlation (Simmons, 1972). On the whole, studies by Paige (1978), Ndatondo (1978), Cooksey (1981), Sudarsono (1984), Wolfe and Behrman (1984) Chernichovsky and Meesook (1985), Smith and Cheung (1986), Jamison and Lockheed (1987), Psacharopoulos and Arriagade (1987) and Lockheed and others (1989) in developing countries have indicated the importance of SES and background factors. In Malaysia, Ishak (1977), Aziz (1989), and Leong and others (1990) have indicated that there is evidence that students' SES and background factors contribute significantly to their academic achievement.

Besides SES, researchers have attributed

academic achievement to variables operating in the home. Floud et al. (1957), Fraser (1959), Dave (1963), Wolf (1964), Coleman (1966), Majoribanks (1979), Health and Clifford (1981), Clark (1983) and Bloom (1982 and 1986) brought about public awareness of the importance of the motivational factor of the home over those relating specifically to material possessions. They were of the opinion that parental attitudes and ambition are more important to the children's educational achievement than SES.

Research from developing countries has also indicated the importance of parental interest and press in relation to academic achievement. Paige (1978), Cochrane and Jamison (1982), Sudarsono (1984), Jamison and Lockheed (1987) and Lockheed and others (1989) found that parents' aspirations for their children's education constitute an important factor in educational achievement. In Malaysia, Aziz (1989), and Leong and others (1990) have indicated that educational and occupational aspirations of parents for their children are important variables in enhancing the academic achievement of primary pupils.

Besides SES and parental factors, the intelligence quotient (IQ) of the child is considered an important variable in determining his academic achievement. Even though the controversy of nature and nurture, sparked off by Jenson (1969), remains unresolved, it is reassuring that a number of social scientists have taken a middle or "synthesizing" position in the controversy. Rossi (1961), Lavin (1965), Jencks (1973), Henderson et al. (1976) and Entwisle and Hayduk (1981) have found that there is a correlation between IQ and academic achievement. However, Kahl (1953), Frazer (1959), Dale and Griffith (1965), Mackey and Simon (1976) are of the opinion that individual differences in the school cannot be reduced merely to a variation in the intelligence of pupils. They have observed that performance varies greatly according to environmental background. According to Shimahara (1986), the Japanese view is that normal children can develop the ability to learn well.

While there is evidence that both hereditary and environmental factors affect intellectual functioning, it is not normally possible to establish

the extent of the contribution of each of these factors in any particular circumstance. It suffices to note that both factors are important and that educational strategies need to be designed with this in mind (Briggs and Telfer, 1987). As indicated by Lawton (1981), IQ tests may be used constructively in schools to make sure that pupils are not under-achieving and failing to produce work which is up to their measured capacity.

Crandall, Katkovsky and Crandall (1965), Coleman (1966), Rotter (1966), Brookover (1979), Reid and Croucher (1980) and Findley and Cooper (1983) have found self-motivation to be an important pupil factor in determining academic achievement. Three groups of variables have been utilised in most of these studies, namely, locus of control, self-concept and academic aspirations. In Malaysia, Maznah and Ng (1985), Maznah (1987), Aziz (1989) and Leong et al. (1990) have found that locus of control, educational expectation and pupil attitudes are important variables in relation to academic attainment.

Besides SES, home, parental and IQ factors, school factors exert an influence on the school attainment of pupils. A number of studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between academic achievement and variables such as class size, school size, quality of teachers, number of library books, pupil-teacher ratios and school and classroom facilities. These studies have been summarized by Simmons and Alexander (1975), Bridge et al. (1979) and Maudas et al. (1980).

## **1.2 Statement of Problem**

Findings of research undertaken in Malaysia concur that the performance of Tamil-medium schools is low. Isahak (1977), Aziz (1989), Leong et al. (1990) have indicated the weak performance of Tamil primary school pupils in their research reports.

### **1.2.1 Academic Achievement of Tamil Schools**

As indicated by Leong et al. (1990), pupils who attend national primary schools where the medium of

instruction was Bahasa Malaysia (Malay Language) were more likely to obtain higher levels of academic achievement when compared with Chinese or Tamil-medium primary schools. In terms of level of achievement, the disparity between the Malay national schools and Chinese vernacular primary schools was minimal. However, the performance of Tamil-medium school pupils was, by far, the worst. As shown in Table 1.1 a majority of the Tamil medium pupils (58.3 %) were in the low achievement category as compared with their counterparts, the Malay (26.2 %) and Chinese pupils (30.4%). There were statistically significant differences in the level of performance between the schools using different medium of instruction.

In his study, Aziz (1989) found that in terms of the potential for academic excellence among the three ethnic groups at the primary school level, the picture presented did not suggest three levels of academic achievement. Instead, a two-level inverted pyramid model, with the Chinese and the Malays occupying the top two levels and the Indians below them, was established. While there was no basic difference in academic



achievement between the Malay and the Chinese rural pupils, there were significant differences between the two ethnic groups (Chinese and Malays) and the Indians.

**Table 1.1**

**Medium of Instruction by Pupil Academic Achievement**

Medium of Instruction	Pupil Academic Achievement				Mean score
	High	Medium	Low	Total	
Malay	28.9 (3239)	44.9 (5031)	26.2 (2933)	74.6 (11203)	13.9
Chinese	25.0 (779)	44.6 (1387)	30.4 (945)	20.7 (3111)	14.6
Tamil	4.6 (32)	37.1 (261)	58.3 (410)	4.7 (703)	18.2
Total	27.0 (4050)	44.5 (6679)	28.6 (4288)	100.0 (15017)	14.3

Source. Leong et al.(1990) Factors influencing the academic achievement of students in Malaysian schools: report prepared for the Educational Planning and Research Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1990.

Note: The higher the mean score, the lower is the level of academic achievement. Figures given are in percentages and numbers within brackets indicate the number of pupils involved.

### 1.2.2 Physical Conditions and Facilities of Tamil Schools

Achievement levels, transition rates and general performance of Tamil school pupils are influenced by a number of interrelating factors, one of which is the physical condition and facilities of Tamil schools. The Education, Welfare and Research Foundation (EWRP, 1987) has given a comprehensive report on the physical conditions and facilities of Tamil schools.

Adequate and sufficient physical educational facilities are important aspects of the school which influence the performance of pupils. According to the Dropout Report of 1973, 88% of the Tamil schools have an enrolment below 200 pupils. Many of them lack even basic facilities such as desks, chairs and chalkboards. Furthermore, the phenomenon of a single teacher looking after a number of classes prevailed in 70% of the Tamil schools. These poor conditions still prevail in many of the Tamil schools, though efforts have been made to improve the quality of these schools.

Leong et al. (1990) have indicated that the performance of Tamil-medium schools is, by far, the worst, given that a majority of the pupils (58.3%) are in the low achievement category. It needs to be emphasised that the medium of instruction of a particular school does not by itself contribute to differences in academic achievement. The medium of instruction is also closely linked to other factors such as the location of the school, the quality of the physical and education facilities, the social and economic origin of the pupils, and the quality of teachers and headmasters. About 85% of the Tamil schools are located in plantations where the physical facilities such as buildings, classrooms, libraries and playing fields are inadequate. About one-third of the teachers in the Tamil schools are temporary in employment and without professional training. It appears that Tamil schools, acknowledged as the poorest and the smallest in the Dropout Report of 1973, have seen minimal changes in the time span of about 22 years.

According to the EWRF report (1987), many of the

problems highlighted by Colleta in his paper on 'Malaysia's Forgotten People' remain in the Tamil schools, especially those which are located in estates. Ramasamy (1989) stated that the vernacular Tamil school system at the primary level continues to experience serious problems. High dropout rates, pathetic performance, and the limited number of children making the transition from the Tamil primary schools to the secondary schools and beyond constitute some of the major problems.

#### **1.2.3. Social and Home Milieu of Tamil-medium Pupils**

The Dropout Report had stated that Indian youths have lower motivation compared to the Malays and the Chinese and, on the average, have the lowest SES of the three communities. This disadvantaged background has strong implications for the enrolment and achievement rates among the Tamil youths. It is often suggested that the main reason for children to dropout in primary schools is parental circumstances such as low SES and the lack of interest in and support for the education of young people. Among the Indian parents in

the plantations, most of whom are illiterate or semi-illiterate, interest in education is low. If a child is seen as a potential worker who can supplement the income of the family, he is, more often than not, taken out of school to learn the skills of a labourer at an early age.

On the other hand, there are parents who understand the importance of education but are unable to give guidance to or coach the children in their school work. Many parents work long hours to earn additional income and, as such, may not have the time to motivate or stimulate their young ones. Furthermore, most plantation children are expected to help with house work and care for the younger siblings. As a result, absenteeism is usually high in Tamil primary schools. Wiseman (1967) indicated that poor achievement produces poor attendance which, in turn, produces poorer achievement and yet poorer attendance. This cycle is vicious in nature and the effect is cumulative.

### **1.3 Purpose of the Study**

Since Tamil school pupils are generally believed

to perform lower than their counterparts in the Malay and Chinese-medium schools in Malaysia, the main purpose of this study is to identify and determine the factors which influence the academic achievement of pupils in a primary Tamil school. The study is focused on three main determinants of academic achievement and their effect on the performance of a sample of Tamil-school pupils. These three main determinants are pupil factors, school factors and parental factors.

The study attempts to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the pupil factors (sex, SES, IQ, kindergarten education, frequency of being absent from school, self-perception of ability in class, tuition and pupils academic and occupational aspirations) associated with academic achievement?
2. What are the school factors (teachers' professional and academic qualifications, teacher experience, workload of teachers and classroom instruction) associated with academic achievement?

3. What are the parental factors ( parental praise for educational success, encouragement to the child to work hard, parents' knowledge of pupil progress, parents' reaction to child's performance in school, parents' attention to child's learning difficulties, and educational and occupational aspirations for the child) associated with academic achievement?

4. What are the pupil, school and parental factors which affect the performance of individual subjects such as Bahasa Malaysia (Malay Language) (Comprehension), Bahasa Malaysia (Composition) , Tamil (Comprehension), Tamil (Composition), English Language and Mathematics in the UPSR ?

#### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

Malaysian studies have indicated the poor performance of pupils in Tamil-medium primary schools. Although a number of factors affecting academic achievement have been identified, the emphasis has been on pupil and school factors. This study focuses on not only pupil and school factors but also parental factors.

Previous studies have, in the main, been surveys. Though the survey method is one of the approaches which can be used in the collection of data, the relatively large sample affords only an 'overall viewpoint', given the need to aggregate the data collected. The adoption of a case study approach, as in this effort, is likely to produce a more detailed picture of the 'what', 'why' and 'how' of factors which have an important bearing on academic achievement. Besides quantitative data collected from the administration of questionnaires to pupils, teachers and the headmaster, qualitative data was obtained by means of classroom observation and interviews with selected teachers and parents of high, medium and low achieving pupils.

Based on the data arising from the case study, suggestions are made for the teachers, the headmaster, District Education Officer and parents through the Parent Teacher Association with regard to the improvement of pupils' performance in examinations. It is also likely that, in the short term, some measures towards improvement can be taken by the school authorities.