

RISK TAKING / CHANGE

Learning Organisations wishing to move forward and be adaptable need to develop a culture that is open to change and risk taking. The concept of risk taking particularly applies to the business oriented organisations but it is also relevant to human service organisations such as schools. Being responsive to changes in society is imperative for schools to be successful and dynamic as they prepare their students to enter this changing society.

Garvin's (1993: 80) definition of a Learning Organisation explicitly states that change is an integral component of a successful model by using the term "modifying its behaviour".

MacNeill and Silcox (1996), and Donegan (1990) also suggest that openness to constant change is one of the most significant characteristics of the Learning Organisation.

Calvert (1991) cogently argues that learning and the capacity to manage change are directly related.

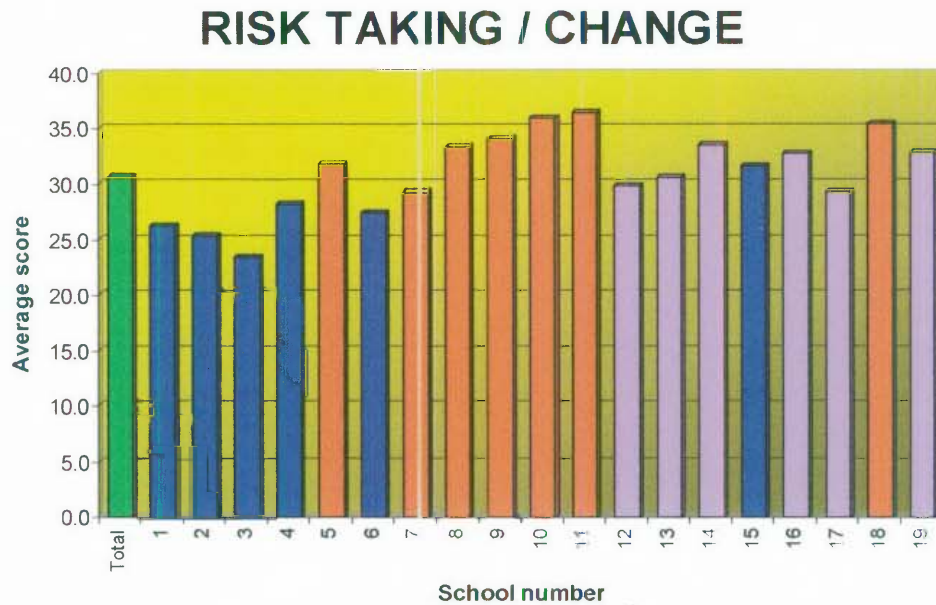
Various authors also promote the closely linked concept of supporting and tolerating risk taking as fundamental to the philosophies of successful Learning Organisations (see for example; Bhindi, 1997; Kline and Saunders, 1993). Watkins and Marsick (1993) even suggest that leaders need to model risk taking and innovation in their working

environment. Stata (1989) also links learning to change, arguing that all major decision makers need to learn together, and be committed to key core values and goals.

The category of Risk Taking and Openness to Change had an average response rate that equalled the average scores of the overall survey (68%). In many respects this is not very surprising as in all organisations there are going to be some people very open to change and risk taking, and others very resistant to change and risk taking. There are big staffing implications for Independent School leaders here. Schools with an established long-serving, ageing and even entrenched staff often find it more difficult to implement change strategies in a positive manner. As has already been stated, it is often more effective when leaders themselves model risk taking and are adaptable to change.

Figure 13 on the following page depicts the results of responses relating to the category of Risk Taking / Openness to Change.

Figure 13 Results for the Risk Taking / Openness to Change Category



't' testing of the responses to the questions in the Risk Taking and Openness to Change category revealed that (see Table 7):

1. There was a statistically significant difference between the means of the girls' and boys' schools (girls' higher)
2. There was a statistically significant difference between the means of coeducational and boys' schools (coeducational higher)
3. There was a statistically significant difference between the means of girls' and coeducational schools (girls' higher).

Table 7

RISK/CHANGE

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances

	<i>Variable 1(Boys')</i>	<i>Variable 2(Girls')</i>
Mean	26.9063	33.5820
Variance	24.8165	34.9765
Observations	64	61
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	117	
t Stat	-6.8093	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.0000	
t Critical one-tail	1.6580	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.0000	
t Critical two-tail	1.9804	

	<i>Variable 1(Boys')</i>	<i>Variable 2(Coed)</i>
Mean	26.9063	31.4434
Variance	24.8165	24.3621
Observations	64	53
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	111	
t Stat	-4.9287	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.0000	
t Critical one-tail	1.6587	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.0000	
t Critical two-tail	1.9816	

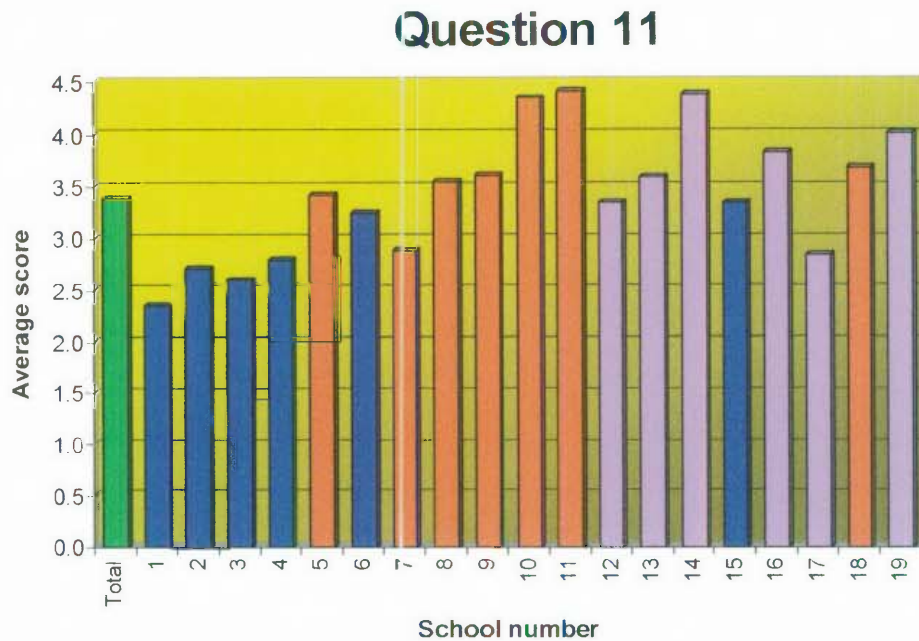
	<i>Variable 1(Girls')</i>	<i>Variable 2(Coed)</i>
Mean	33.5820	31.4434
Variance	34.9765	24.3621
Observations	61	53
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	112	
t Stat	2.1041	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.0188	
t Critical one-tail	1.6586	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.0376	
t Critical two-tail	1.9814	

Questions 2, 11, 17, 21, 30, 34, 35, 46, and 52 were placed into the Risk Taking and Openness to Change category for the purposes of survey analysis.

Question 2, related to mistakes being viewed as learning experiences, was also categorised under this banner (it was put in the Positive Thinking category). If risks are not taken and change for the better not embraced, then clearly mistakes will be seen as negatives and will be less likely to be discussed or even made. Mistakes are made when the limits are pushed, and when improvements or innovations result from people who are happy to try things (without fear). When this happens, then organisations move forward.

Question 11 refers to the responsiveness of the schools policies and practices to changing needs. The following graph clearly illustrates the data that was collected.

Figure 14 Policies and practices are evaluated and modified as the needs of the school change

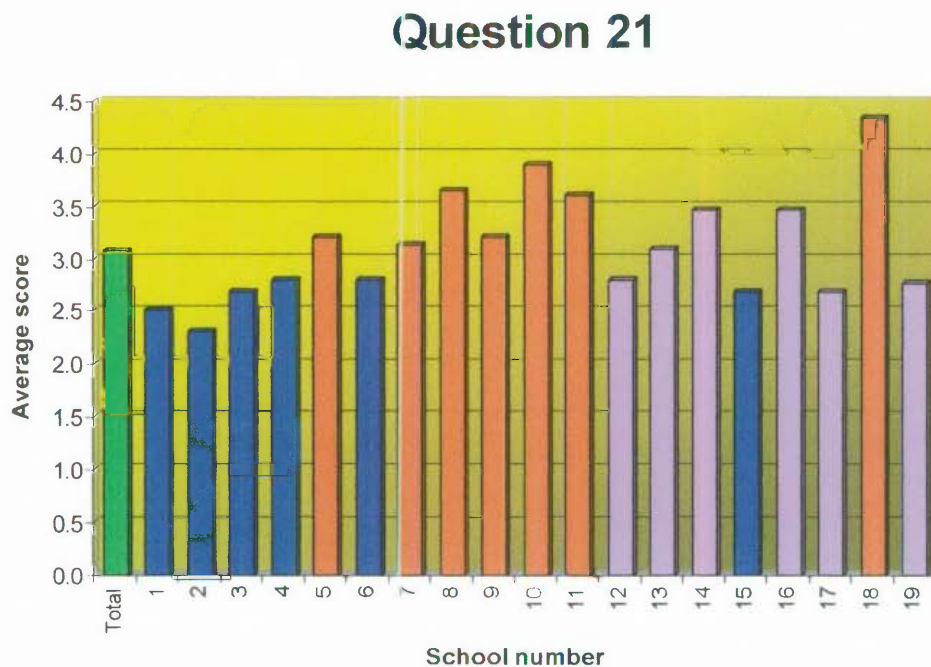


This graph indicates that many sampled schools are not very responsive to changing needs. Almost a third of the schools barely scored above 50%, with only three scoring very highly. Schools tend to change their policies and practices more slowly than most commercial organisations. Clearly there are significant time constraints that make it harder for schools to collaboratively work through their policies as often as they probably should. Nevertheless, if schools wish to take on the attributes of the Learning Organisation, these logistical problems need to be resolved. The qualities of flexibility and adaptability and openness to change clearly lead to the need for policies and practices to be modified as the needs of the school change.

Question 17 gauged the degree to which the Principal involves others in planning. This question, although most obviously relating to leadership, has also been placed in the category of Risk Taking and Openness to Change because of the risks involved in empowerment and collaboration. The autocratic Principal that makes all of the decisions, and has a larger degree of control, often does so because he or she knows that ultimately it will be their responsibility. It also appears to be more efficient for a leader to make planning decisions (it is certainly quicker). But faster and easier is not necessarily better. It is not the scope of this thesis to discuss in detail the merits of collaborative decision making (see for example; Beare et al, 1989). The evidence is clear that for a Learning Organisation, leadership practices which value collaboration and empowerment is vital. Thus, the risk of involving others in planning should be worthwhile in the long term.

Question 21 attempted to measure the degree to which the unexpected is viewed as an opportunity for learning. This question is a little similar in nature to the one involving mistakes being viewed as learning opportunities. Here again, the unexpected things need to be viewed as positives and should be embraced. The average score for this question was rather low (3.06), with most schools not responding well here (only four girls' schools had an average score of over 3.5 for this question). It could be argued that the schools in the sample preferred to deal with the expected, the known things, and stay at arms length from those unexpected learning opportunities that emerge regularly (and which teachers use to great effect in the classroom). The graph below represents the data collected for this question.

Figure 15 The unexpected is viewed as an opportunity for learning



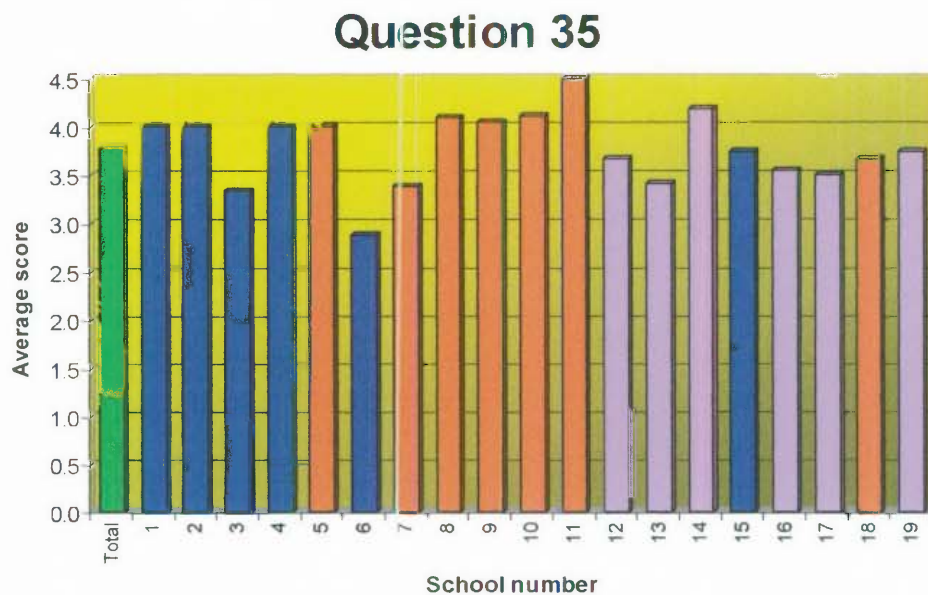
Question 30 asked whether worthwhile innovations are utilised. This question is oriented towards more product-oriented businesses, where new and improved models are continually produced. The average score for this question was 3.18 (64%), with only a small number of schools (all boys') showing very poor responses to this question. Most schools scored in the intermediate range. One would hope that in the near future schools will “hone” their students’ abilities to utilise information technology and other innovations as very useful tools for learning.

Question 34 asked whether management practices are responsive to the needs of staff. This question had an average score of 3.17 (63%), with a small number of schools scoring either very highly or very lowly. While this question is related to leadership, it is

also indirectly linked to the notion of openness to change in that it asks if practices are responsive rather than just suited. Obviously staff needs change, and if management practices are responsive to these needs then over time a culture that embraces (or at least accepts) change may develop.

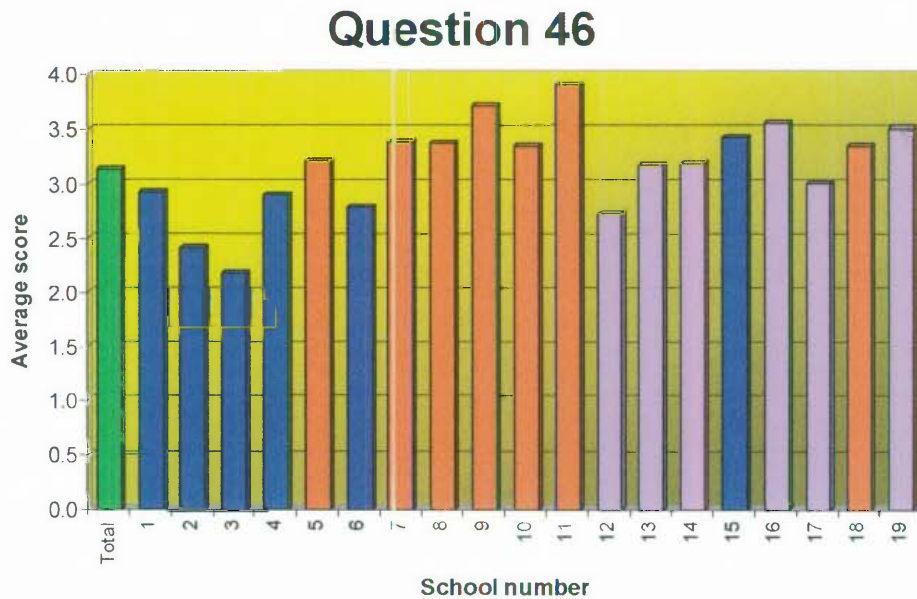
Question 35 attempted to determine the degree of professional autonomy given to teachers in the school. This was one of the higher scoring questions in this survey, with an average score of 3.79 (76%). Independent Schools have always been well known for their autonomy, both as distinct organisations and within organisations. Interestingly a number of boys' schools, as well as girls' schools, scored very highly in this question. This question was related to trust, and the inherent risk in trusting that the employees will intrinsically do the right thing and a trust also, that the right people have been employed. Without either of these two aspects of trust (and the associated risks involved with both of them) it would be much more difficult for any leader to effectively allow a high level of professional autonomy. The following graph represents the data collected for this question.

Figure 16 There is a high level of professional autonomy in the school



Question 46 asked whether school policies and practices are flexible and adaptable, depending on the circumstances. This question is closely linked to two earlier questions (Questions 11 and 34). The terms ‘flexible’ and ‘adaptable’ relate to an ability to change, and this is vital for successful Learning Organisations. The average score for this question was 3.13 (63%), which was similar to the other related questions. Here again the girls’ schools responses appear to be superior to the other two groups. This raises the question; Is it simply a very good sample of girls’ schools relative to the other groups, or is there something, such as leadership style, that is different about girls’ schools that has made them appear to be more in line with the philosophy of the Learning Organisation? The graph below represents the data collected for this question.

Figure 17 School policies and practices are flexible and adaptable depending on the circumstances



Question 52 asked whether continuous improvement is aimed for at all levels of the school. Improvement implies a change for the better. Schools must be open to change if they are to seek continuous improvement. This is one of the most fundamental concepts of the Learning Organisation. Without a desire for continuous improvement embedded into the whole school structure and culture, a school cannot hope to be a Learning Organisation. Interestingly, the average scores for this question were very high at 3.93 (79%). Half of the schools averaged over 80% for this question. However, boys' schools in the sample had lower average responses (3.36).

The responses to this question imply that:

1. At the heart of the “learning” school is a desire for improvement.

2. Schools may not embrace change but may seek continuous improvement, without necessarily seeing this as a contradiction in itself.
3. Schools are now aware of and are beginning to take on board the philosophy of the Learning Organisation (thus the high scores for core questions like this one and others).
4. The marketplace for Independent Schools is very competitive and schools need to be moving forward to meet the communities (changing) needs.

O'Brien (1994) argues that for improvement to occur, change is inevitable. Learning is of paramount importance in the seeking of continuous improvement. Where change is resisted (almost as a matter of course), organisations can become static, entrenched. The Independent School market is becoming more competitive every day, and schools need to be more responsive to the society and market that they wish to capture. This involves an element of risk taking at times, and clearly indicates the need for a culture that is embracing of change, as suggested by Marquardt and Reynolds (1994). Societies change, and thus schools that are moving forward need to change at times. This is the basis of the Learning Organisation.

The philosophy of promoting Risk Taking and being Open to Change is consonant with the true Learning Organisation. It is this specific area where the Independent Schools in this sample have much room for improvement.

COMMUNICATION

Geneen (cited in Crosby, 1996: 41) suggests that,

“The most important element in establishing a happy, prosperous atmosphere was an insistence upon open, free, and honest communications up and down the ranks of our management structure.”

All organisations wishing to succeed today need to communicate effectively. Perhaps more importantly (certainly in the case of Learning Organisations), they also need to continually look at ways to improve communications, both internally and externally. This is borne out by Peters and Waterman’s (1982) study of outstanding American companies.

Garvin’s (1993: 80) definition of a Learning Organisation involves the process of transferring knowledge. If communication is poor or closed or selective, then the transferring of knowledge cannot be truly effective. Senge (1990) repeatedly highlights the importance of open and effective communication through his models of “Building a Shared Vision” and “Team Learning”. He argues that open communication within groups that have meaning and decision-making power is imperative. Kline and Saunders (1993), Watkins and Marsick (1993) and Quinn Mills and Friesen (1992) all emphasise the importance of developing an openness to the outside world, empowerment from within and the sharing of learnt concepts – none of these can occur without effective communication practices.

The overall average scores for the Communication category fell in the middle range (at 69%). Two thirds of the boys' schools had responses that were well below the average. In this case, however, a number of girls' schools also had below average responses. One of the perennial difficulties with communication in schools is that of getting the right balance between confidentiality and information required by individual teachers. That said, schools still need to be continually looking for ways to ensure that communication strategies are improved and that the paper-pushing bureaucratic tendencies do not take too deep a root in school life. 't' tests revealed that the means of the girls' and coeducational schools were statistically significantly higher than the mean of the boys' schools. There was no evidence of a statistical difference between the mean scores of the girls' and coeducational schools (see Table 8). The data that was collated and categorised under the Communication category is represented in the graph below.

Figure 18 Results for the Communication Category

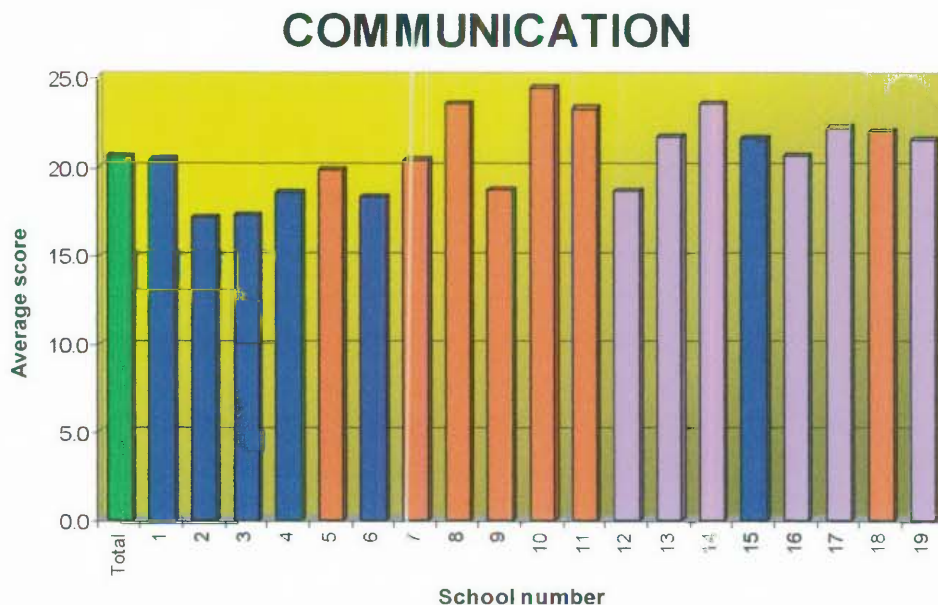


Table 8

COMMUNICATION

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances

	<i>Variable 1(Boys')</i>	<i>Variable 2(Girls')</i>
Mean	18.9688	21.6967
Variance	13.3006	17.3607
Observations	64	61
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	119	
t Stat	-3.8875	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.0001	
t Critical one-tail	1.6578	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.0002	
t Critical two-tail	1.9801	

	<i>Variable 1(Boys')</i>	<i>Variable 2(Coed)</i>
Mean	18.9688	21.3585
Variance	13.3006	16.9171
Observations	64	53
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	105	
t Stat	-3.2919	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.0007	
t Critical one-tail	1.6595	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.0014	
t Critical two-tail	1.9828	

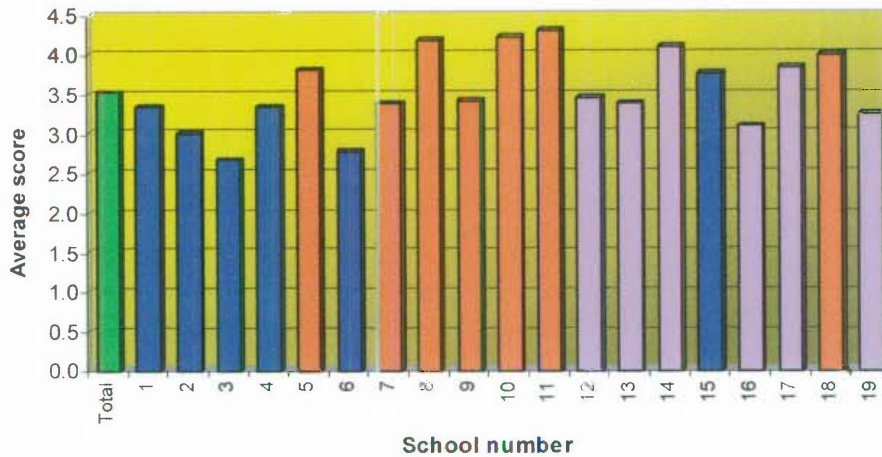
	<i>Variable 1(Girls')</i>	<i>Variable 2(Coed)</i>
Mean	21.6967	21.3585
Variance	17.3607	16.9171
Observations	61	53
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	110	
t Stat	0.4353	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.3321	
t Critical one-tail	1.6588	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.6642	
t Critical two-tail	1.9818	

Questions 1, 5, 9, 10, 26, and 43 were placed into the Communication category.

Question 1 attempted to measure the degree to which there are open communication channels at all levels of the school structure, consistent with the philosophy of the Learning Organisation. A vibrant culture that is learning and forward moving, embraces changes and places people at the heart of the organisation, must be underpinned by open and effective communication channels. The average score for this question was 3.52 (70%). Four of the girls' schools and one coeducational school had superior responses to this question, while all but one of the boys' schools had below average scores. It may be that some of these schools are more cognizant with the philosophies of the Learning Organisation. Open communication channels, however, tend to be closely related to leadership – leaders who communicate effectively set the tone (just as the leader as learner does) for effective open communication channels throughout the school hierarchy. This view will be examined further next chapter. The data that was collected for Question 1 is illustrated in Figure 19 on the following page.

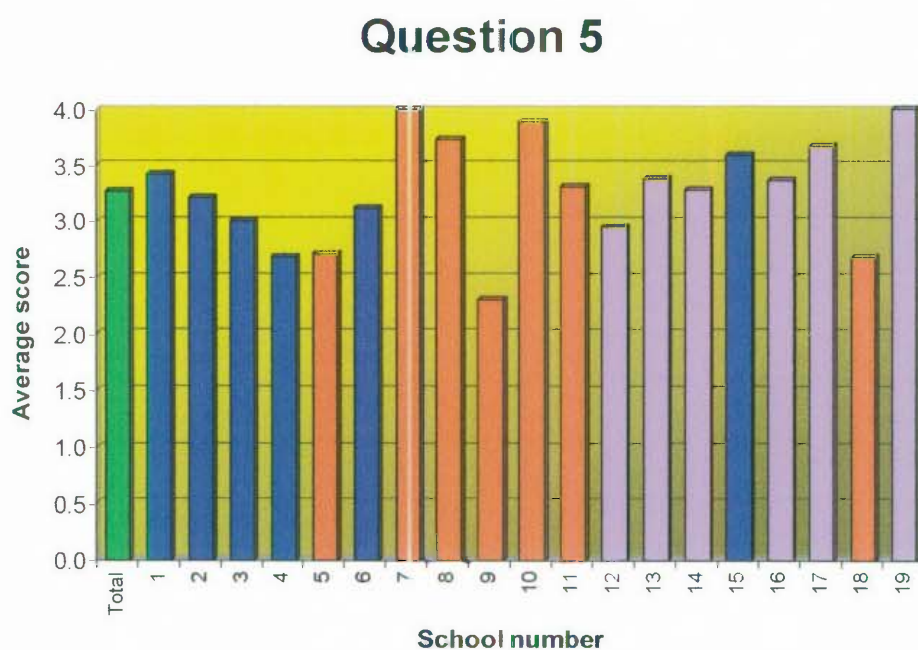
Figure 19 There are open communication channels at all levels of the school structure

Question 1



Question 5 asked whether lively informal discussion about educational matters occurs in the staff room. This question is linked to a number of categories, with the two most significant being Communication and Professional Development. If communication is open and effective and ideas freely shared and learnt from, then the responses to this question should be very positive. Informal staff discussions are also very valuable as indirect (hidden) forms of professional development (to be discussed later). The total average score for this question was 3.26 (65%). The individual school responses for this were surprising, and are illustrated on the following page.

Figure 20 Lively informal discussion about educational matters occurs in the staff room



As can be seen from the above graph, responses to this question are very varied. Most interestingly perhaps though, is the fact that three of the four schools with the lowest average scores were girls' schools (as were three of the top four). Lower scores might imply that:

- ideas are not readily shared
- staff may not spend much time in the common room
- staff tend to talk about non-school matters in the common room
- a culture of informal, spontaneous professional development has yet to develop fully within the school.

Questions 9 and 10 attempted to gauge the degree to which learning experiences are shared both formally and informally with peers, and the latter with the staff body. These questions are linked to the previously discussed question, and relate to the concepts of whether the organisation as a whole is working together with relatively common goals, and how open departments are. Schools with truly open communication strategies should face less departmental barriers, and should realise that much information learnt can be shared and relevant across these artificial boundaries (especially as they relate to teaching methods).

Interestingly, the average score for Question 9 was 3.54 (71%), while the average score for Question 10 was 3.01 (60%). The response for Question 9 compares favourably with that of Question 5, which would indicate that learning experiences with peers tends to occur formally (this could indicate at, for example, department level). However, the lower score for Question 10 would suggest that learning experiences are less likely to be shared at a staff level (for example at full staff meetings).

Five schools (three coeducational) had very good responses to Question 9, with all of the boys' schools being around or below the average.

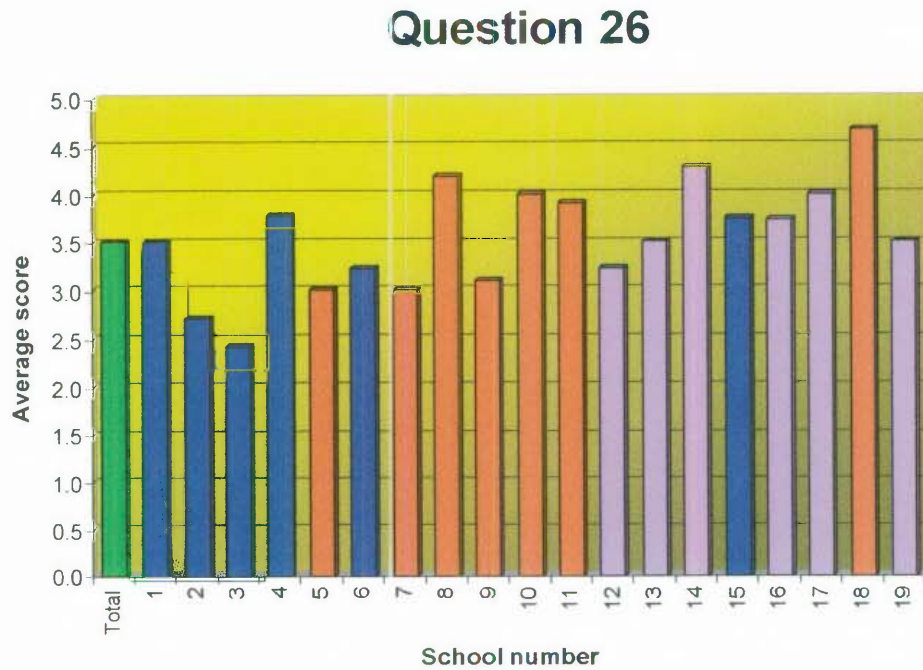
Interestingly, the three girls' schools that had low scores for the earlier question had responses much closer to the average here. This would indicate that formal structures are

in place, particularly at departmental level, to encourage the sharing of learning experiences.

The lower score for Question 10 implies that perhaps measures have not been put in place to facilitate shared learning at a whole staff level, whether that be through staff meetings, newsletters/journals, noticeboards, and so on. All but one of the coeducational schools had above average scores and all but one of the boys' schools had scores that were clearly below the average.

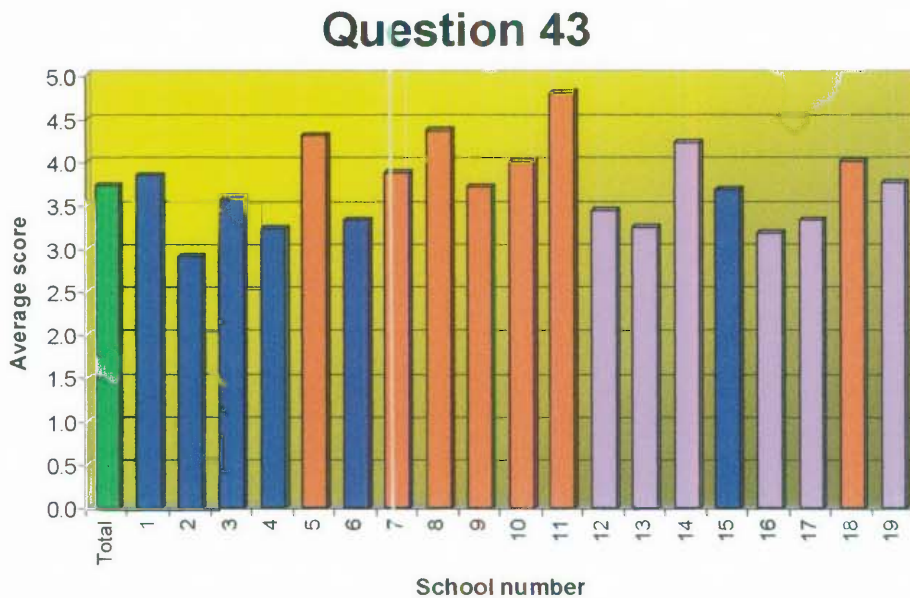
Question 26 asked whether staff members feel free to speak their minds about what they have learned. This question is again related to the fundamental significance of open and effective communication, particularly as it relates to learning (and thus, improvement). It is similar in underlying philosophy to some of the preceding questions. The average score for this question was 3.5 (70%), indicating relatively average responses with regards to the Communication category. There was a fair degree of variation to this question, with a couple of schools achieving very poor scores (around 50%) and three other schools scoring well above the average. The importance of learning and sharing in that learning needs to be further encouraged and applauded. The data collected is illustrated in Figure 21.

Figure 21 Staff members feel free to speak their minds about what they have learned



Question 43 attempted to measure the degree to which everyone is kept well informed of activities and developments around the school. This question had an average score of 3.72 (74%), the highest of all questions in the Communication category. Most schools scored relatively highly in this question, indicating that schools are improving at communicating more effectively about what is actually going on (if not yet their learning experiences). Four schools scored very highly, and only one school had an average score of below 60%. This data is represented in Figure 22.

Figure 22 Everyone is kept well informed of activities and developments around the school



As has already been outlined, no organisation can succeed without effective communication. In Learning Organisations, communication becomes even more important as channels need to be opened for learning to be shared effectively. Many of the other categories identified in this model of the Learning Organisation depend on communication, most notably vision, promoting positive thinking and placing people at the heart of the organisation. Again, leadership is a key determinant in the development of effective communication channels.