

Judging Quality and Equity

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One of the hard lessons learnt from the rapid expansion of regional education systems is that increases in access and enrollment do not lead to improvements in quality or equity. Comparative education is the field in which judgments are made about quality and equity across countries, districts, provinces, and schools. Such comparison facilitates benchmarking, a key in directing successful educational reform.

Much of the data for making judgments now come from two types of large-scale assessments: 1) international assessments administered across countries, for example, the Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS); and 2) national assessments, administered within a country, designed to provide yearly monitoring of learning standards and progress.

In 2004, the Ministry of Education revamped its national assessment to include census administration of achievement tests in mathematics and language arts in Standards 1 and 3. From 2005, results were reported using performance standards. These standards are expectations of students' performance based on documented content standards and administered tests. Four categories of students were thus identified and described: 1) students who exceeded standards (Level 4); 2) students who met the standards (Level 3); 3) students who were just below the standards (Level 2); and 4) students who were well below the standards (Level 1).

What do the 2005 to 2007 national assessment data say about quality and equity? Focusing upon the language arts area, the data consistently indicate that close to 40% of students are well below expected standards, as judged by standard setting panels commissioned by the Ministry of Education. High levels of underachievement are concentrated in the Mayaro/Rio Claro and Sangre Grade administrative districts and in the island of Tobago. A most worrying finding is the large gap between male and female students, often larger in these poorly performing regions.

Are these findings valid? The recent release of data from the 2006 PIRLS international assessment, in which Trinidad and Tobago participated along with 45 other countries and provinces, allows us to judge. The findings reveal that Trinidad's score of 436 is well below the international mean of 500, and the country is ranked 39 above Iran, Indonesia, Qatar, Kuwait, Morocco, and South Africa. The list of countries below ours suggests that quality is not necessarily related to money or resources, but perhaps to technical know-how in education and overall development of the sector.

In terms of the international PIRLS benchmarks, only 2% of the Trinidad and Tobago sample was above the advanced benchmark, and some 36% did not reach the lowest international benchmark of performance. Thus, in terms of standards, we might conclude that there are simply too many students below acceptable standards and too few who are excelling.

Sadly, the data also confirmed that gender differences in literacy are indeed significant. Indeed, it is worrying that Trinidad and Tobago has the fourth largest gender difference behind Kuwait, Qatar, and South Africa. This finding suggests, perhaps, that the relative difference in performance between males and females in this age group is significantly above that of other countries and the international benchmark.

What are the solutions? To be sure, there is no quick fix. Certainly, one approach might be to foster greater awareness of the issues involved. For example, in South Africa, the media quickly picked up on the results, which showed South Africa ranked last, and the Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, gazetted a three-year "foundation for learning" strategy, which involves the annual testing of all children from Grade 3. She admitted that "poor performance in PIRLS indicates a need to intensify and review our efforts at ensuring a proper foundation for learning."

Although the performance of the UK has declined from 2001 to 2006, the relative performance of males has improved. This is likely the result of numerous interventions focused on improving literacy among males implemented by individual schools and local education authorities (LEAs). Still, it is notable that only 9% of the students in Trinidad and Tobago lived in homes with more than 100 children's books (as reported by the parents), compared to 36% in New Zealand and 32% in Scotland. Clearly, improved literacy is not just a school issue but relates to wider social and national policies.

Another approach might be to develop a compensatory education system, which seeks to provide greater resources and training to schools that cater for the poor and disadvantaged. There are no easy pathways on the road to improving quality and equity in an education system. Talk is cheap, blame is plentiful, but organized approaches are likely the best bet. Evidence-based decision is the key to improving results, as reflected in the improved PIRLS performance of Singapore and the Russian Federation in 2006 compared with 2001.

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