

Schooling and Poverty

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Is it useful to talk about poverty in a nation in which poverty levels have declined so dramatically in the last decade? Although Trinidad and Tobago currently reports relatively low poverty rates (17%) and a GINI index measuring income inequality of 0.40, poverty and schooling are so intimately woven that they will remain critical issues in the education reform agenda for some time yet.

When we speak of poverty and its possible influence on educational attainment, it is not just the economics of poverty that concerns us. A better term, which captures multiple education related elements of economic and social disadvantage, is *social capital* or *cultural capital*. These include the range of knowledge, experiences, and connections that enables someone to succeed in school.

In Trinidad and Tobago, why are there schools with many disadvantaged students? These schools might be created by what we call, “the education market.” An education market exists in a school system where families are able to freely choose the schools their children attend (even with some restrictions). Unmanaged, education markets often result in differentiated school systems, with clients segregated into different schools. In such a situation, students with economic and social disadvantage can become concentrated in some schools.

We call schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students, “Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances” (SFCC). These schools might have tremendous difficulty ensuring student learning by simply using traditional methods. Where are these schools found in Trinidad and Tobago? They are located both in urban and rural areas because both urban and rural poverty exists. Why do these schools fail? The answer is complex and no one factor is involved. Improving schools in such a situation requires sustained evidenced-based targeted support, focus on student learning, and high expectations. Is it inevitable that these schools fail? Since improvement is possible, the answer is, no. Is it really worth the effort to help schools in challenging circumstances? It is, because if these schools fail to add value to students’ lives, social mobility and equity are inhibited.

The concept of adding value simply means that a school is able to enhance the learning experiences of the child using clearly set benchmarks. In practical terms, adding value also means that students are exposed to print-rich environments and life experiences not accessible in their immediate communities and homes. It also means that learning environments are structured to help students to develop basic literacy and numeracy skills that allow them to function effectively outside the school environment and prepare them for the Information Age. Adding value does not mean throwing up arms in frustration or blaming families and communities for low achievement.

At the School of Education, our collaborative research in the area has produced some interesting findings on the relationship between individual and collective indices of poverty and educational attainment. In one study, we analysed Eleven Plus placement

data from 1995 to 2005 across communities in the Diego Martin Administrative District. The communities were first ranked using the Basic Needs Index, published in the poverty study of April 2007 by Kairi Consultants. We found that children from well-to-do communities had more than a 50% chance of receiving their first choice. In poorer communities, this fell to 10 to 30%.

Such unequal outcomes are also reflected in data from the National Assessments of Educational Achievement in Standards 1 to 3. The data suggest that schools where many students are classified as disadvantaged have low performance as measured by the distribution of students in the different achievement levels reported. Schools with high numbers of students classed as “economically disadvantaged” often reported more than 75% of the students at Standard 1 and 3 performing at Level 1 (Well Below Standards) in Mathematics and Language Arts.

What is the solution? How do we ensure that all students have equal opportunity to learn? The first step in improving schools and the system is greater awareness of the problem; the second step is collecting additional data to identify the nature of the inequality; and the third step is the evidence-based application of accountability and compensatory systems, which will ensure that each child, even the poorest, has an opportunity to learn.

The relationship between poverty and education attainment is neither linear nor inevitable. From our ethnographic study of these schools, a simple solution is to promote high collective efficacy among staff. Collective efficacy includes the beliefs, attitudes, and expectations that drive teachers to help students of all backgrounds and circumstances, believing that they can help them and that the children will learn. These beliefs may be linked to the efforts teachers make in difficult circumstances.

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