

School Failure

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Education systems are intended to prepare children for fulfilling roles in society. However, there are many students who fail to learn what is taught in the schools and others who refuse to learn. The resulting school failure now threatens the development of many societies.

We often hear of children in Trinidad and Tobago who leave secondary school unable to read, write, and calculate. Ministry of Education statistics for the CXC General Level examinations in 2000 show that more than half of the students of the comprehensive secondary schools failed English A, and more than 70% failed mathematics. Teachers encounter students who sit in classes day after day, unable to perform even the simplest learning tasks. This problem goes back to the primary school where there are students who lose their capacity to learn what is taught. They attend school as a ritual, writing the SEA examination as a ceremonial rite of passage. These children fall behind and eventually give up on education.

Jere Brophy, a noted educator, contends that most children start school with enthusiasm, but over time some of them find school work to be stressful and threatening. Unlike students of limited ability, who can fail despite their best efforts, failure syndrome students often fail because they have not made the effort to succeed and they simply give up at the slightest difficulty.

Three consequences of school failure

School failure results in tremendous economic loss to the nation. The workplace demands increasingly higher levels of education, even for low-level jobs, and it is difficult for low achievers to become employed and economically independent. Later on in life these children can impose further demands on the treasury because "make work" projects and other forms of state-funded relief may be required to sustain them. The state is also denied revenues and taxation to be expected from the workforce. Furthermore, school failure diminishes the human resource pool that is necessary to sustain national development.

Researcher Ruth Ekstrom has found that school failure leads to early dropping out from school. The 2000 UNDP report, "Youth at risk," indicates that in Trinidad and Tobago dropping out begins at the primary level and by Form 2 in secondary school 28.2% would have dropped out.

A more disturbing consequence is the association of criminal behaviour with school failure. There is clear evidence that students who do not achieve at school are most likely to become delinquent. Investigators have found that a large number of inmates at the Youth Training Centre were low achievers. Researcher Zeng-yin Chen explains that poor school performance reduces one's attachment to school, thus weakening the bond to conventional norms and leading to deviancy. It is clear that we need to address school failure if we are to confront the problem of violence and crime in the wider society.

A profile of school failure students

Students who experience school failure syndrome often display an external locus of control, they believe that their success or failure is determined by circumstances beyond their control; and they are not inclined to link success to investment of their own efforts.

These students have very little belief in their capabilities, and a poor sense of personal responsibility. They have no sense of belonging to the school and are not interested in its academic purpose. They view the school merely as a venue for socializing and find the formal regime of the classroom to be highly stressful, showing a preference for action. A recent survey of truants in a central-based junior secondary school revealed that the majority found their lessons to be uninteresting and boring.

Many victims of school failure do not have well-developed interpersonal skills and their friends often display high absenteeism, low achievement, and a common hatred for school. Such peer groups reject students who show interest in academic achievement.

Reducing school failure

Robert Slavin of the Center for Research on Effective Schooling refers to wide-ranging research to conclude that school failure is preventable. School-based strategies for reducing failure need to begin from preschool, and continue throughout primary and secondary school. Slavin recommends that preschool children should be placed in stimulating, developmentally appropriate settings for some portion of the day. Later on, in the infant classes, there should be an emphasis on reading, with one-to-one tutoring being employed for at risk students.

Schools need to provide an orderly environment, exuding a climate of purpose, with high value placed on achievement and intellectual pursuits. The principals and staff need to closely examine the processes of the school to see if these can be inimical to achievement. For example, the indiscriminate use of public address systems during class sessions disrupts classes and gives students the clear impression that their studies are of lesser importance than routine announcements.

The school should be managed to promote achievement. For example, research has found that retaining children to repeat classes can be far worse than promoting them. Similarly, grouping low-achieving children can confirm low achievement. Remedial action should be taken when students are found to be falling behind.

Teachers should provide positive feedback and allow students to experience success. They should provide students with individual attention and involve them in engaging learning tasks that provide tactile, kinesthetic and other forms of stimulation. "Chalk and talk" must give way to activity methods, group projects, investigations, and problem solving. Teachers can evoke interest in topics by showing students the practical application and importance of what is to be taught. Most students respond to a well-organised lesson taught by an enthusiastic teacher who has genuine interest in the students.

It has been found that when parents set high standards at home and demonstrate high aspirations for their children, the children exert more effort and their school achievement is higher. Parents should demonstrate belief in their children's ability by providing them with encouragement and an appropriate learning environment.

In closing, I note that there have been proposals for dealing with failing students by consigning them to institutions supervised by the military. The research literature indicates that student-control ideology, whereby order is maintained by threat of force and punitive sanctions, has the effect of producing rebellion and lowers self-esteem. Such conditions will hinder learning. It is recommended that such students be taught in a humanistic environment that conveys trust, concern, and acceptance. An environment that recognises the feelings of the students, and provides them with opportunities to participate and take decisions is required to rescue victims of school failure.

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