

Prestige Schools – Myth or Reality

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For decades, parents have struggled to have their children placed in such schools as Bishop's High School in Tobago, St. Mary's College, Queen's Royal College, Fatima College, or St. Joseph's Convent, to name a few. Even officials in the Ministry of Education and the various denominational boards seem to send signals which convey that these first-choice schools (known as 'prestige' schools) are more effective than other schools—particularly government schools.

As a researcher, former primary and secondary school teacher, former teachers' college lecturer, and now researcher and university lecturer with responsibility for the training and development of teachers, deans, heads of department, vice-principals, and principals (at the primary and the secondary levels), I cannot conclusively say that there is a significant difference between denominational school personnel and government school personnel.

If there is a difference between denominational schools and government schools, then this will have to be in the culture of these schools and perhaps the support they may have from parents and other well-intentioned stakeholders. Certainly it cannot be that denominational teachers are more effective than government teachers. My 2002 study of schools in the East-West Corridor (Toco to Diego Martin) revealed no significant difference in teacher performance.

However, what seems to have been taking place is the increasing influence of the lessons sector. From the primary to secondary level, and increasingly at the tertiary level, lessons seem to have become mandatory. Because the barometer for measuring school success at different levels in our society is success in the SEA, CXC, and CAPE examinations, people have become convinced that certain schools are among the best. Few acknowledge other factors.

However, I believe that the society should have a clearer understanding about what makes schools effective. The research literature defines an effective school as one in which the leadership and staff are ready to structure the way the school operates, think about its goals and priorities, create a climate within the school where students and teachers can take 'risks,' involve parents and community in a meaningful way, and plan strategically for the future. Also, in effective schools, administrators and their staff should be willing to develop policies that address student achievement, encourage an ethic of caring and sense of community, make wise use of technology and resources, and retain strong instructional leadership capable of developing a shared vision of educational excellence.

Indeed, the evidence is available to argue that schools are effective only when they are able to provide basic survival skills, computation and language skills, knowledge of basic health care, physical education, and ethical attitudes and values. More specifically, effective schools: 1) are student-centred, 2) develop and deliver academically rich

programmes for their students, 3) provide instruction and promote student learning, 4) have a healthy school climate, 5) foster collegial interaction, 6) have extensive and ongoing staff development, 7) practise shared leadership, 8) foster creative problem solving, and 10) involve parents and the community.

In addition, effective schools tend to adhere to the basic tenets of schooling, which include: 1) making sure that children of all abilities learn and that the organisation of the school supports this learning; 2) allowing children to develop socially within a secure and supportive environment; and 3) giving all children time and space to be able to manipulate their physical world, which could range from learning to manipulate a pair of scissors to learning to swim.

It is only on the basis of the above criteria that we should judge which are our prestige schools in Trinidad and Tobago. Indeed prestige schools must be evaluated in terms of their contribution to our political, economic, social, spiritual, and technological development.

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