

## **Education and Policy**

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Educational policy is fast becoming a matter of grave concern worldwide. Researchers like Allan Walker and Clive Dimmock are now arguing that the examination and analysis of educational leadership and management have generally failed to keep pace theoretically, conceptually, and empirically with practice. They also argue that because of the relentless impact of globalisation on international education systems, the spread and application of policies across national boundaries and cultures have become extremely popular, and continue to proliferate without attention to the peculiar needs of individual nation states. Some analysts believe that this is facilitated by the dominance of the electronic and print media, jet transport, international conferences, international agencies, multinational corporations, and overseas education.

Against the background of these developments, this article recommends revisiting how educational policy in Trinidad and Tobago is conceived, implemented, and reviewed. It also submits that unless we, as a nation, pay more attention to systematic indigenous research on policy formulation, implementation, and analysis, our education system may remain qualitatively stagnant.

I have always been fascinated by how educational policy is formulated in Trinidad and Tobago. While I accept the conclusion of several commentators that we have an over-centralised education system, it is still my view that, whether it is in education or other domains, for policy to be effective it must be driven by research and needs assessment.

According to modern trends, a number of complex variables must be considered when planners are engaged in planning for educational reform. Planners must now recognise that: 1) respect for authority and traditional institutions is rapidly declining; 2) increasingly, many young people believe that education does little to promote their economic prospects, while many adults are seeking to improve their education; and 3) the impact of families on educational success can no longer be ignored—educated parents tend to see smaller families as an opportunity to invest more in each child, while dysfunctional families continue to increase the degree of instability that children demonstrate in schools.

Education policy makers must now recognise and accept that schools today are not only working with children, but also with their families or household contexts. They also must take into consideration that schools no longer stand supreme. There is no doubt that competition from private schools has returned; and that sooner rather than later it will also come from other organisations seeking to provide education and training, such as employers' professional associations and private training companies. This should not be a surprise since, traditionally, in Trinidad and Tobago, we have always had the thriving and lucrative private lessons industry, which has permeated all levels of our education system—primary, secondary, and tertiary.

We also should not forget the ways in which information technology and the Internet are changing how knowledge is produced, disseminated, and stored. As a result, schools and other educational institutions have lost exclusive control of the curriculum, in particular, and knowledge, in general.

Demographic changes are leading not only to a smaller proportion of youth in the population, but also to a steadily larger and more active group of older adults with their own constellation of demands on education and society. Increasing population diversity, coupled with changing attitudes towards multiculturalism and assimilation, requires all institutions, and by extension policy makers, to be more sensitive to the range of values and beliefs held by all citizens.

Observations in the literature and of different countries have shown that two constants impact on education systems and relate to the trends that I have identified above—money (of which we seem to have an abundance and therefore it should not be the problem for us) and the politics of education. In spite of the modern imperatives of education, Caribbean governments seem reluctant to leave control of schooling in the hands of educators and other relevant organisations.

The bottom line, however, is that educational policy must be formulated to meet the needs of a nation and its diverse population. This can be done only if policy makers: 1) make teaching and learning needs the centre of policy making; 2) recognise that changes in classroom practice cannot be maintained unless they are supported by appropriate curriculum, structures, and organisation; 3) demonstrate that decisions about teaching and learning are accompanied by identified programmes and strategies to make them attainable; and 4) understand that school improvement strategies must focus both on how to accelerate the progress and enhance the achievement of youth and adults, as well as how to establish and sustain effective management practices within institutions.

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