

Towards Educational Quality

June M. George

Part 1: Analyzing the Learning Process

The outcome of learning in school is the result of the interaction between what the student brings to the school and what is encountered at school. It is well accepted that students do not come to the classroom with a clean slate. Their many interactions and experiences outside of school have a significant impact on what sense they are able to make of their exposure in the classroom. However, little attention has been paid to some of their prior experiences. Students bring experiences to school that are both positive and negative. We need to understand some of these background dynamics if we are to plan well for our children's education so that the negative outcomes are minimized.

One of the background variables that might be impacting on how students fare in school is the level of stability in the homes from which students come. These home backgrounds may vary—some students grow up in home environments that provide extensive human and technological support for schooling while others are not as fortunate. The level of proficiency in English (which is most often the language of instruction in the schools) may also vary and this might be linked to the type of home environment from which the students come.

In the home environment, also, some students conduct their lives by drawing on traditional practices and beliefs that have been handed down from one generation to the next, and they bring such knowledge with them to school. For example, students have views about what keeps them healthy (e.g., “cooling out” when the body is “heated” before taking a shower) that may not be congruent with what is taught in school. Also, students have knowledge of their environment and how it may be harnessed for their benefit (e.g., being able to devise implements for catching fish in coastal communities) that is not tapped in the school setting. These, and other factors, impact on the efficiency with which students can make use of what is offered to them at school.

In similar fashion, we tend not to pay attention to some aspects of the student's school experiences. For example, little attention is usually paid to whether teaching styles match learning styles; whether students feel comfortable in the school environment with its own norms and practices; or whether differences in the backgrounds of students and teachers are impacting negatively on the learning process and on the quality of the learning outcomes.

Some of the learning outcomes that are usually measured in our education system include (a) performance in classroom tests; (b) place in class; (c) regularity and punctuality; (d) performance in the SEA; (e) performance at CXC-CSEC and A'Level/CXC-CAPE; (f) performance by gender, school, school type, school district, and so on. All of these measures provide us with useful information that can help us in our quest for quality; however, they do not tell the whole story. It is clear that some of the issues identified earlier as possibly having an impact on learning in school are not covered by such studies. We need to ask some different questions as we seek to gather more complete information about our system in our quest for quality.

Part 2 of this article will seek to elaborate on some of these other issues that need to be researched.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine