

Article

A Whole Education Approach to Education Reform in Barbados: Effective Provision for Students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

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Abstract: Improving education provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities in Barbados is the focus of this article. It takes into account the wider historical and educational context and uses a whole education approach to conduct the analysis and propose transformation of the education system, involving three key components. First, abandoning the system of selective secondary education based on the results of a high-stakes examination, the 11 plus, and replacing it with a more equitable system of geographical zoning. Second, revamping curricula at primary and secondary schools to emphasise the development of literacy, numeracy, interpersonal and vocational skills rather than focusing mainly on preparing students for academic examinations, especially the 11 plus examination. Third, implementing comprehensive policy and procedures for the identification and effective education of children with special educational needs and disabilities in order to maximise outcomes for all students.

Keywords: transfer to secondary school; high-stakes examination; curricula; special education policy



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1. Introduction

The main focus of this article is on improving education provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities in Barbados. However, when considering this issue, it is important to take into account the wider historical and educational context in Barbados in order to provide a thorough evaluation of the current situation and to make realistic and comprehensive recommendations for future improvements. Therefore, it is necessary to take a whole education approach when conducting this analysis in order to consider all relevant aspects of the situation and to generate comprehensive recommendations.

Barbados is a small island state in the Caribbean region with a population of around 270,000 people. The education system in Barbados has its roots in a plantation slave-based society that characterized most of the English-speaking Caribbean in the colonial period from the 1630s onwards. During this period, wealthy planters sent their children to be educated in Britain, while educational opportunities for the enslaved population were minimal. Between the end of slavery in the 1830s and independence in the 1960s, colonial educational systems in the Caribbean continued to be elitist in allowing for the selection of a small number of high-achieving students to attend prestigious secondary schools [1]. It is a legacy that has endured, despite the expansion of secondary school systems across the Caribbean to achieve the realization of universal secondary education [2].

In the colonial period in Barbados, each secondary school had its own entrance examination. But in 1959, there was the introduction of what is today known as the 11 plus examination, which is a standardised test for students between the ages of 10 and 12 used for allocating places in secondary schools. This has created a hierarchy of secondary schools whereby students with high scores gain places in elitist schools while those with low

scores get to attend schools with reputations for poor academic outcomes and disruptive behaviour.

Therefore, a key legacy of the colonial era, that has remained in place across the Caribbean, is a high-stakes examination underpinning selective systems for transition to secondary schools that are stratified into elitist and failing schools [2]. Addressing this issue is a major driver for education reform in Barbados.

Because Barbados, along with other islands in the English-speaking Caribbean, continues the colonial legacy of the 11 plus examination to determine secondary school placement, the 11 plus exam still dominates the education system more than 50 years after its use was discontinued by 95% of education authorities in England, where it originated.

A consequential problematic issue within the Barbados education system is the extensive under-achievement of pupils in primary schools, which is considered to be due to the intense focus of primary school teachers on helping more-able students to do well in the 11 plus examination while those who are struggling with literacy and numeracy are paid little attention [3–5]. There have, therefore, been calls for the abandonment of the 11 plus and reform of the education system in Barbados for over thirty years, but successive governments have been slow to bring about change [1,5,6].

In contrast, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report on creating world-class education systems has found that major reforms have been achieved over the past thirty years in many countries including Chile, Ireland, Portugal, Scotland, Vietnam, South Korea, Poland, Denmark, Finland, Germany and Estonia, that have resulted in substantial improvements in educational outcomes [7]. In a report on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) conducted in sixty-nine countries, the OECD (p. 46) concluded the following.

PISA results show that more inclusive and fairer school systems are those that provide access to quality early education for all children, offer additional support to struggling students, rather than require them to repeat grades, and delay the age at which students are selected into different programmes or schools. These systems also strive to have excellent schools located in every neighbourhood and ensure that they are accessible to all students, and provide additional support to disadvantaged schools [8].

This statement makes it clear that to be optimally effective, education reform must take a whole-of-education approach, implementing a wide range of measures, taking account of cultural and socio-economic contexts, including many of those stated in the above quotation. A key factor noted in this quotation from the OECD that is of particular relevance to Barbados is delaying selection using high-stakes tests like the 11 plus examination, which segregate children by ability at an early age. Delaying this allows children to benefit from a broad curriculum for as long as possible and to receive remedial teaching when necessary. Across the OECD countries, for example, the average age at which school systems begin to select students is 14 years. So segregating students at age 11 is considered very early and delaying selection has been found to reduce the effects of socio-economic factors on achievement and to improve equity, as well as educational outcomes.

There are similarities between issues with the education systems in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados. In all three countries, it appears that a high proportion of children leaving primary schools at around age 11 are reported to have inadequate literacy and numeracy skills to cope with secondary schooling [2]. This is considered to be mainly due to the constraining effects of the high-stakes examinations used for the transfer to secondary schools on the teaching they have received. With teachers and schools under enormous pressure to produce good 11 plus results, the primary school curriculum is narrowed as children are relentlessly drilled on basic academic skills in order to do well in the examination [4].

In addition, many primary schools in Barbados engage in the streaming of children into ability groups from as young as seven years of age, with most attention being paid to those in higher streams who are likely to do better in the 11 plus examination. At the same time, children in lower streams who are struggling are less likely to have their

needs addressed and, therefore, may make little progress during their primary school careers. Once children are pigeon-holed into streams at such a young age, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to move into a higher stream [9,10]. Therefore, the die is cast as early as age seven, with many children getting further and further behind their peers as each year passes.

It has been found that children who attend private rather than government primary schools show substantially better achievement in basic academic skills [4]. Therefore, many parents who can afford it enrol their children in private primary schools in order to give them a better chance of doing well in the 11 plus. It should not be surprising that private schools with more middle-class intakes, superior resources and smaller class sizes do better at preparing children for an examination like the 11 plus, thereby increasing the inequity of the system [11].

The reforms suggested in this article, if implemented, would lead to improvements in levels of literacy and numeracy in government primary schools and thereby the narrowing of the gap between them and private schools. Most importantly, it would lead to an increased proportion of children progressing to secondary schools with sufficient basic academic skills to be successful.

2. Need for Reform of the Education System in Barbados

A report published in May 2020 by CEO World magazine [12] on the world's best education systems, surveyed 196,300 educators and other stakeholders in education, who rated education systems in 93 countries on the quality of the public education system and related opportunities. Barbados was ranked 79th out of the 93 countries, while Trinidad and Tobago was ranked 58th, the Bahamas 74th and the Dominican Republic 78th. Clearly this indicates a need for change in Barbados, as for many years the proportion of the government budget spent on education has been equal to or greater than that in many other countries in the region, so one would not expect such a low ranking.

Also, although official figures are not published, it has been estimated that up to 80 percent of children who enter secondary schools in Barbados leave without gaining any qualifications [13]. In contrast, the figure in New Zealand, for example, where there has never been an 11 plus examination used to select children's secondary schools, this is around 20 percent. That is, around 80 percent of New Zealand children at age 16 years achieve a pass in the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Level One, which is the equivalent of Barbadian children gaining at least four subjects in Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) Caribbean Secondary Education (CSEC) examinations. In contrast, in Barbados, up to 80 percent have achieved no qualifications whatsoever by age 16. This disastrous situation has pervasive consequences, both for the children's futures and for the country's social and economic development. It is considered that this must be addressed by reforming the education system using a broad-based whole-of-education approach, and that this is urgent if Barbados is to be competitive in the 21st-century world.

The key to reforming the education system in Barbados is taking a whole-of-education approach that includes moving away from a selective secondary school system focused on the achievement of a high level of academic qualifications by a small minority of students, to one that provides all young people with an excellent general education. This will provide a sound basis on which young people can make a choice between working to achieve either academic or vocational qualifications by the time they leave secondary schools in order to go on to tertiary education or to start work.

Transformation of the education system, therefore, requires three key developments. First, abandoning the system of selective secondary education, based on the results of the 11 plus examination, by using geographical zoning to create neighbourhood community secondary schools. Second, revamping curricula at primary schools in order to optimise the learning of literacy and numeracy and promote social and emotional development, and at secondary schools to provide technical and vocational options alongside academic programs. Third, implementing comprehensive policy and procedures for the education of

children who experience difficulties learning in schools due to their special educational needs or disabilities.

3. Abandoning the 11 Plus and Adopting Zoning for Transfer to Secondary Schools

The first and most essential component of a whole education approach to education reform in Barbados is to adopt a geographical zoning system for the transfer from primary to secondary schooling, thereby abandoning the use of the 11 plus examination for this purpose.

This is the most feasible and equitable way to organize secondary transfer and will result in children attending the secondary school nearest to where they live. Thus, bringing about non-selective secondary education in Barbados can be achieved by carefully organising the zoning to ensure that each secondary school has as broad a socio-economic spread of pupils as possible. Within this type of organization, all children attend the secondary schools for which they are zoned from forms one through five and have a chance to gain entry to sixth form classes at around age 16 years, based on their CSEC examination results [1].

Two sixth form colleges, converted from existing secondary schools, could cease to teach students in forms one through five and only enrol students in their sixth form years who are undertaking advanced-level courses. All other secondary schools would enrol students in forms one through five and offer programs leading to CSEC examinations, as well as more practical programs leading to vocational qualifications such as Caribbean Vocational Qualifications (CVQs). Students would then get into the sixth form colleges based on their passes and grades in the CSEC examinations taken at the end of the fifth form year, or get into community college or polytechnic courses based on their performance on CVQs, or leave school to get jobs.

There are several advantages of this form of zoning. First, students will not need to spend time travelling to secondary school by long bus trips as they will be able to attend the nearest school to their homes. They will, therefore, be able to put all their energy into their studies at school and will be able to return home with some energy left to do homework, which for many children is not the case at present. Second, children will be able to attend their local primary schools, as there will be no need for parents to drive them to schools that have a good reputation for 11 plus results, because the transfer to secondary schools will be based on the zones where they live. Third, the involvement of parents and other family members in the education of their children, both at home and at school, is facilitated when children attend schools in their local communities [14]. This enables parents to support the school more easily and be more able to attend parent–teacher meetings, be involved in the school’s Parent Teacher Association and engage in other activities based at the school. Fourth, the greater involvement of people from the community in which schools are based is possible with neighbourhood schools. Church leaders and people from the local business community are more likely to associate themselves with local schools and thereby be able to support teachers in the maintenance of good discipline and provide links to sources of work experience and jobs for school leavers. Fifth, being educated with their peers from their local communities in mixed ability classes will lead to increased self-esteem and lower levels of disruptive behaviour among pupils, which will make teaching and learning more effective and reduce the incidence of violence in schools [15].

4. Revamping Curricula at Both Primary and Secondary Schools

The second component of a whole education approach to reform in Barbados is to revamp school curricula. Once the need to focus most of their time and effort on preparing children for the 11 Plus examination has been eliminated, primary school teachers will be able to deliver a more broadly based and relevant curriculum. This will include developing a balance of basic academic skills, including reading, writing and mathematics, along with the interpersonal skills needed for developing the personal confidence necessary for a successful career and a productive life [16]. To help them in these tasks, teachers will be

able to use the Criterion Reference Testing recently introduced into Barbadian primary schools, to target teaching on areas that need to be developed, for individual children as well as for entire classes, thereby ensuring that their teaching is effective in optimizing learning. Criterion Reference Testing is a type of formative evaluation and feedback that has been found by educational research to be one of the most effective strategies for improving educational attainment [17,18]. When widely implemented, this will lead to an increase in the proportion of children leaving primary schools with adequate reading, writing and mathematics skills for their secondary education.

In addition to facilitating academic learning, primary school teachers will also be able to focus more on personal and interpersonal skill development through teaching social and emotional learning programmes. In this way, they will be able to focus on the development of the so-called soft skills, including teamwork, communication, time management, conflict resolution and problem-solving skills, that employers consider essential for being successful at work. Also, teachers will be able to use strategies such as Circle Time, personal development and peer-support programmes to create positive learning environments that prevent disruptive and violent behaviour, reduce bullying to a minimum, and prevent the development of mental health problems [19]. The result of these changes will be that many more children will be able to move on to secondary school with the basic academic skills, confidence and interpersonal skills needed for success than has been the case under the 11-Plus regime that currently exists.

In secondary schools, greater emphasis needs to be placed on technical and vocational education by making these attractive alternative options during the later stages of secondary schooling. So, while all students will study mainly academic subjects with some technical/vocational courses in the first few years of secondary schooling, there should be a point when they have to decide which type of programme to concentrate on, such as in many other countries such as Finland, Poland, Germany and the Netherlands [7].

This could be implemented in Barbados by allowing students during their fourth and fifth form years to choose to follow more technically or vocationally focused curricula, leading to Caribbean Vocational Qualifications (CVQs) that would be available alongside the more academically focused curriculum taken by students aiming to sit CSEC examinations. So, whereas students following an academic programme and sitting CSECs would be aiming to go on to sixth form colleges and then university, those following the technical and vocational route to prepare for taking CVQs would be aiming to go on to institutions such as community colleges, polytechnics or hospitality schools, or to leave school at age 16 years to get jobs.

5. Implementing Comprehensive Policy for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

The third component of a whole education approach to reform in Barbados is to develop and implement effective policy and procedures for educating children with various levels of special educational needs and disabilities [19]. This includes those with learning difficulties such as dyslexia, intellectual disabilities, autism, sensory impairments and physical disabilities, as well as those who are gifted but are underachieving. With effective special educational needs policy and procedures in place, teachers will be able to address children's learning difficulties, gifts and talents, and ensure that all children develop to their maximum potential. Developing and implementing the elements of policy and procedures outlined below for educating children with special educational needs and disabilities is essential in order to provide effective education. Having comprehensive policy and procedures for children with learning challenges will significantly reduce disruptive behaviour and violence at school and enable many more children to learn the skills needed to have a productive life and make valuable contributions to Barbadian society. The various aspects outlined below must be addressed in order to implement effective education for children with special educational needs and disabilities in Barbados.

5.1. National Policy for Special Needs Education

The Barbados Government needs to have a published policy on the education of children with special educational needs and disabilities. This policy must reflect the current reality in Barbados that the vast majority of these children are already educated in mainstream schools, with only a small minority, those with more severe and complex needs, being educated in special schools or special units attached to mainstream schools. The policy should require special education teachers and mainstream school teachers to liaise and collaborate in order to meet the wide range of special needs within a flexible and inclusive model, like that in Finland, which allows children to be educated in mainstream schools or in special facilities that will best meet their needs, transferring between the two when necessary [20].

5.2. Legislation for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

There is a need for legislation on children with special needs and disabilities that ensures they have a right to an education which meets their needs, and specifies the responsibilities for meeting special needs of the Ministry of Education and schools. For example, in the US, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act specifies six principles providing assurance of an appropriate education. First, mainstream schools accept students with special needs or disabilities and provide needed services. Second, it is a requirement that children are formally assessed and that parents receive guidelines about the services available. Third, schools are required to set up Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for all children with significant special needs. Fourth, education systems are required to educate children in mainstream schools to the maximum extent possible. Fifth, parents must be fully involved in designing their children's programs. Sixth, safeguards to ensure children's rights are maintained are included [19]. Similar legislation is required to assure Barbadian parents of their children's rights to an appropriate education.

5.3. Guidelines for Schools on Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

The Ministry of Education should provide guidelines for schools for the procedures that must be followed, for example, using IEPs for those children with more severe needs, and support from teacher-aides for those with less severe needs. For example, the Code of Practice for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in England sets out detailed guidelines of the procedures to be used and the resources that must be provided by schools [19]. These include a three-stage process for assessing and planning programs for addressing special needs. The first stage focuses on using classroom resources, including teacher-aides. The second stage focuses on school-wide resources such as input from a special needs teacher within the school. The third stage involves using resources from outside the school, such as educational psychologists, in designing IEPs and specifying resources that are to be provided for the child.

5.4. Learning Support Coordinators in All Schools

Every school, primary and secondary, should be required to have a special education-trained teacher to coordinate the school's special needs support, identify children with special needs or disabilities, provide support and guidance to teachers, and liaise with the Ministry of Education, other agencies and parents [19]. Learning Support Coordinators (LSCs) should be qualified special education teachers who have had additional training to prepare them to take on the LSC role. It is expected that LSCs in secondary schools and large primary schools would be full-time, while those in smaller primary schools would be part-time. Learning Support or Special Needs Coordinators are an established part of education systems in many countries, including England and Finland, and are considered to be essential to ensure effective special needs provision.

5.5. Initial and In-Service Training for All Teachers on Meeting Special Educational Needs

Essential training on teaching children with special educational needs and disabilities should be provided for teachers in all mainstream schools through input into initial training and in-service training. Advanced training should also be made available for teachers in special schools and units, and for Learning Support Coordinators. This could be provided by Erdiston Teacher Training College and the University of the West Indies School of Education in Barbados, using on-campus and on-line courses such as those used in many other countries, such as New Zealand [21,22].

5.6. Educational Psychologists for Assessments and Program Planning

The Ministry of Education should establish an educational psychology service to give guidance to schools on how to provide effective education for children with a wide diversity of special educational needs and disabilities. Besides conducting assessments of individual children with special educational needs and disabilities, psychologists can help schools set up programs aimed at building positive learning environments, such as social and emotional learning programs in primary schools and anti-bullying programs in secondary schools. An important focus will be facilitating higher levels of academic achievement for all children through the establishment of evidence-based practices such as cooperative learning, formative evaluation and parental involvement [18,23]. Educational psychology services that support schools are well established in many countries, including the USA and England.

5.7. Guidance Counsellors and Social Workers in Schools

All Barbadian secondary schools now have guidance counsellors and primary schools have access to social workers. These staff need to work closely with teachers, educational psychologists, other professionals and parents to ensure that children with special educational needs and disabilities are identified as early as possible and their parents supported in working closely with schools.

5.8. Partnership Services for Families of Children with Special Needs

The Ministry of Education should establish a national Parent Partnership Service with coordinators who work with parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities to help them access the most appropriate education and other services for their children, as well as offer parent education and support. Parent Partnership Services have been developed in many countries including the USA and England, and are found to be invaluable by parents of these children [14].

6. Conclusions

Implementing a whole-of-education approach to reforming the education system in Barbados involves abandoning the 11-plus examination in favour of geographical zoning, implementing comprehensive policy and procedures for children with learning and behavioural difficulties and disabilities, and revamping primary and secondary curricula. These are key elements of the necessary reform of the education system in Barbados. Utilizing a whole-of-education approach to reforming the education system will create comprehensive community schools which will bring about a world-class education system that develops the skills and talents of all young people in Barbados and prepares the diverse workforce needed to take the country forward in the 21st Century.

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