

Efficiency of Educational Systems

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Traditionally, Caribbean governments spend substantially on education and that is increasingly true for other countries in Latin America. However, in an era of declining income, educational efficiency must become the mantra for governments and other stakeholders in education. Limited funding means that education consumers must get greater value for the monies that they put out.

According to UNESCO, *efficiency* refers to the relationship between the inputs into a system and the outputs from that system. Therefore, an education system is said to be efficient if it can maximise outputs from a given input. So the question is: To what extent are education systems in the Caribbean maximising our returns given the high investment in education? Efficiency then relates to the quality of an education system; its ability to produce valued outcomes with minimum expenditure.

Two recent articles written by academics outside this country using local data may shed some light on the issue of efficiency in the education system.

The first study is by Sandra Schrouder, an adjunct staff member of the Florida Atlantic University, who undertook a comparative analysis of educational efficiency in the Caribbean. In her study, she compares five countries, including Trinidad and Tobago, using a simple input-output model.

The other study is by Clement Jackson of Cornell University, who produced a paper on ability grouping and academic inequality. He provides data on the efficiency of secondary school as he tracks students who took the Eleven Plus examination and compares their performance at O'Level.

Schrouder believes that given the investment in education, returns by the education system are insufficient. She measures both participation and attainment rates at various levels. Jackson's study is focused on the way the education system is organised, especially at the secondary school level. The presence of a differentiated system in which only 15% of students attend elite schools, he suggests, is not efficient. His data also suggest that elite schools may not add as much value as one might expect.

These are sound findings when viewed from the perspective of data from international assessments that compare the performance across nation states. Currently, Trinidad and Tobago is enrolled in two major international assessments, the IEA Progress in Reading Literacy Survey (PIRLS) and the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The data from past studies in these assessments show that even in oil-rich countries like Kuwait, equity and quality remain issues.

We might conclude that it is not so much how much money you invest in the inputs, but how you use that money that contributes most towards system effectiveness. A national

education system must be built to ensure system goals rather than structured to perpetuate myths such as those embodied in the beliefs associated with elitism.

This is not just an issue for governments alone but it also relates to core beliefs and desires of some major stakeholders. For example, the retention of a differentiated secondary school system is not peculiar to Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean; however, some systems have moved beyond that to improve significantly the outcomes or perceived value of all schools. Despite early tracking, education systems such as that in Germany may be considered relatively efficient.

At times, some have benchmarked the educational development of Trinidad and Tobago with that of Singapore. Some have the misguided belief that Singapore's development in the field of education is only recent. Singapore did become self-governing in 1959 and separated from Malaysia in 1965, but its driving forces in educational development have been very different to countries in the Anglophone Caribbean.

The primary aim for Singapore was to develop an education system that could support the development of an industrialised economy. This required systematic attention to issues of equity and quality amidst expansion. In the late 1970s, Singapore's education system took a significant turn based on a study of educational wastage and literacy levels. Evidenced-based decision making led to the era called "sustainable development through an efficiency-driven education, 1978-1997."

Perhaps the way forward for Trinidad and Tobago, then, is to pay greater attention to evidenced-based decision making in education policy formulation. As some have argued, sourcing the evidence is an integral part of the process. Research-based evidence derived from empirical and qualitative studies might provide deeper insight into current perplexing issues and the way forward. The state currently supports research, in general, through direct funding to higher education institutions. This is laudable, but now there is need for greater applicability, access, and use of research findings.

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