

Towards Educational Quality

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Part 2: Establishing a Research Agenda

In order to have a greater chance of success in our efforts to provide quality education for our children, we need to get a clearer picture of the education system than is currently available. We therefore need to ask probing questions about various aspects of the educational environment.

First, we must ask questions that will help us to understand the backgrounds from which our students come and the level of support for learning that exists there. If, for example, students are coming to school from disruptive homes, and/or from homes in which the television set seems to play non-stop, and/or from communities where personal safety is an issue, then our planning for learning for such students might need to be different from what we would normally do.

We must also ask questions about students' out-of-school experiences and their expectations of schooling. For example, boys who live in rural coastal communities such as Toco are known to spend some time constructing devices for catching birds, fishes, and other animals. These devices have a fair amount of physics inherent in their construction, even though the boys may be unable to articulate these principles in scientific terms. Yet, such background knowledge is hardly ever tapped in school science classes. These out-of-school activities are likely to vary from district to district, and even within a given district, but we can still look for some broad pillars on which learning in school can be built. Students' feelings about, and expectations of, schooling should also be explored. Since students are the major stakeholders in the school system, then it might be instructive for us to understand what they expect of schooling.

We also need to ask some different kinds of questions about students' in-school experiences. For example, it is more likely now than before that boys are being taught mainly by women and that students generally are being taught by teachers of a different cultural and social background. How are our students and teachers faring in such complex classroom situations? Do these situations pose identifiable barriers to learning? What are the ways in which our students learn best? Do we know what they are and are we catering for them? Then, there is the question of the language of instruction vis-à-vis the language of the student. Do our students understand what their teachers are saying? Further, since informal observations would suggest to us that some students start off their school careers very excited about schooling but seem to lose interest as the length of exposure to schooling increases, we need to ask questions about what it is about schooling that causes this to happen.

In order to find answers to the types of questions suggested above, research projects must be planned and data collected. Data-collecting strategies must be chosen to match the nature of these questions. We would need to interview stakeholders on a one-on-one basis as well as in small groups. We would need to spend considerable time observing and documenting classroom transactions. We may even need to visit homes to talk to

parents/guardians and to observe the home setting. The range of techniques for gathering data would need to be expanded to make appropriate use of technology in the form of cameras, audio- and video-recorders, and computers. Much of the data collected is likely to be qualitative in nature, and techniques for analyzing this type of data must be mastered. While we may need to study large groups, there may also be the need to conduct in-depth case studies to gain deeper understandings of particular issues in specific contexts.

Collaboration in the research effort will be required among all the major stakeholders: teachers and students; parents, community groups, and members of the business community; and, most importantly, the Ministry of Education and the School of Education of The University of the West Indies (UWI).

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