

Education in the Caribbean

Raymond S. Hackett

Prof. Carl Campbell, in his book *History of Education in Trinidad and Tobago*, pointed out that by 1981 the education system in Trinidad and Tobago was the best in the English-speaking Caribbean. He also noted that, at the same time, a peculiar malaise had begun to set in—a persistent decline in student academic achievement. As we settle down in the new millennium, the concern has gone beyond failing student academic performance. Cries of an education system in crisis, and rampant indiscipline and violence in schools have now become the order of the day, and policymakers in the Ministry of Education are frantically seeking solutions. Also, many national observers and researchers are wondering how best they can address our mounting educational problems.

In this respect, it might be instructive to examine the experiences of other countries in the region. In an attempt to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the education systems in the Caribbean, I recently conducted a survey in Barbados, Grenada, and Jamaica. The survey sought to explore the perceptions of ordinary citizens, business persons, parents, and officers of teacher associations.

First of all, it should be noted that all Caribbean countries have more or less the same problems. Young people, like their parents, continue to be ideologically confused and not truly in tune with the political system. Unemployment continues to be a chronic problem. A substantial number of our Caribbean youth now look outward for economic salvation. Socially and spiritually, our societies are disorganized. The only order among most of our youth seems to be the consensus of their musical tastes and the aping of negative aspects of American culture. All seem mesmerised by rock and Jamaican dance-hall music, as well as by imported hairstyles, garments, and jewellery. Technologically, digital games and the downloading of music occupy centre stage. Generally, no emphasis seems to be placed on creativity, innovation, and invention.

In Barbados, few of those interviewed believed that there was a crisis in the education system. Almost all respondents felt that talk of male underachievement was irrelevant, and that the system was working to the benefit of all those who wish to succeed. Almost all interviewed supported the official view that: (a) education should be seen as a means for both personal opportunity and national development, (b) each child matters, (c) emphasis on only academic achievement tends to marginalise those who are talented in domains other than the cognitive, and (d) the real power of education reform lies in new teaching methodologies and the development of a new-style teacher.

Chief Education Officer, Wendy Griffith-Watson, speaking about EDUTECH, the latest educational reform initiative in Barbados, summarised the Barbadian perspective as follows: “We will always place a high value on academic excellence in our schools, but our entire education system cannot be geared only to producing scholars. We cannot cater only to the top end and ignore those who are not going to be doctors and lawyers. We also have to focus on creating as many future citizens as possible who have the knowledge, skills and attitude to be productive in our society and our economy.”

The situation in Grenada was different. While, generally, the feeling was that the education system was quite effective, many maintained that educational development plans made excellent reading, but failed reality checks. Reform emphasis was found to focus on: (a) placing computers in schools, (b) making universal secondary education a reality in the near future, (c) providing leadership training for school administrators, (d) developing a curriculum which emphasises technological studies and technical-vocational training, and (e) promoting the community college model.

Male underachievement was perceived to be a serious issue in Grenada. The President of the teachers' union believes that its causes can be traced to: (a) the dominance of female households in Grenada, (b) too many female teachers, and (c) the perception in Grenada that the financial rewards of teaching "does not make a man feel as a man."

In Jamaica, public perception was that the education system was serving only a few; that boys in particular were not performing as expected. The Jamaica Teachers' Association (JTA) insists that schools are not provided with the resources for them to respond effectively to students' needs and government's reform initiatives. Most importantly, it should be noted that secondary education is not free in Jamaica. Parents still have to engage in what government euphemistically calls cost sharing.

Like other Caribbean islands, Jamaica is intensely concerned with promoting information technology in schools and the community college model for lifelong learning. Through the *HEART* Trust/NTA, attempts are also being made to ensure that technical-vocational training is provided for young school leavers.

Clearly, educational problems in individual Caribbean islands are not radically different. Also, the islands do not seem to be responding convincingly to the increasingly turbulent environment. Perhaps the time has come for us to sit down as a people with a common heritage and destiny to brainstorm a way out of our predicament. There is no doubt that we in Trinidad and Tobago, as the Jamaicans say, have the money. I am not too sure, however, that we have the vision, will, and expertise to effectively cope with our problems.

The following insights were gained from the survey: (1) education systems in the Caribbean would be more humane and effective if they provided tangible evidence of the value they place on their workers; (2) education systems cannot be effective if provisions are not made for promoting more meaningful parental involvement and consciousness; (3) more attention needs to be paid to early childhood care and development, primary education, and special education projects in the Caribbean; (4) we cannot continue to cater only for students with visual and auditory learning styles; students with other learning styles must be recognised; (5) governments need to give serious attention to the views expressed by stakeholders; and (6) education reform must be linked to the rising employment and social problems among young citizens.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine