

Harnessing unique educational opportunities in the Caribbean

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An increasing body of research and political agendas across the Commonwealth Caribbean frequently assert the importance of local educational development (Louisy, 2004; UNESCO, 2007). In a rapidly changing global environment, investment for educational improvement is a desire of both large and small states.

The positive composition of the term 'development' is hard to challenge given that the enhancement of children and young people is a commendable ambition. Developing an educated population is therefore understood to be the foundation for social and economic advancement. Indeed, over the last two decades there have been a number of inspections, initiatives and policies in the Caribbean that have resulted in improved education provision and outcomes. In particular, the expansion of early childhood care and education (ECCE) linked to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have ensured that governments across the Commonwealth are working to reduce poverty and various inequalities. For example, the government of Trinidad and Tobago constructed 51 new ECCE centres by 2011 in order to increase state provision (Lochan, 2014).

Such enhancements are not without issues, and these are crucial in understanding the nuances of educational provision in the Commonwealth Caribbean. This brief article outlines key challenges facing education systems seeking progress in the Caribbean, in particular, local enhancements and the positive expansion of educational provision. It also points towards the value for society when harnessing unique educational opportunities that exist and emerge in countries across the Caribbean region.

Understanding the challenges

Commonwealth Caribbean countries have a strong Anglophone tradition that not only testifies to contemporary strategic development in the region but also carries educational colonial legacies. Indeed, most education systems are similar in structure to that of the UK's, whereby distinct stages are evident: ECCE, primary, secondary and tertiary. Sensitivities associated with traditions in the education system have emerged in recent times. Local populations have demanded improved facilities in schools, often replicating the standards set for historic grammar schools and private institutions (Christopher, 2014). Financial pressure contributes to arguments for reparations whereby poverty factors linked to the infrastructure of state schools could be alleviated. Inadequate resourcing therefore remains a key challenge for education development in the Caribbean.

Although the physical environment is an important issue in education development, the quality of teaching and learning continues to be a fundamental challenge for some schools and institutions. At the start of the millennium it became possible to

identify measures implemented to enhance the quality of learning and teaching in primary and secondary schools. In Jamaica the Ministry of Education sought to enhance primary teacher training (with funding from USAID) for 43 poor-performing schools. The development of teaching staff aimed to enhance skills so that there could be a shift from a teacher-led role to one that involved pupils as active learners for problem solving. Research conducted by Jennings found that 'teachers taught lessons out of context and with no attempt to relate to the children's experience or previous knowledge' (Jennings, 2014: p. 252).

In other Caribbean countries this has also resulted in changes to the curriculum design, which endeavours to create links with local knowledge and regional demands. Yet the training of professionals and maintaining a strong consistent curriculum is an aspect that is heavily influenced by migration. For example, in small British overseas territories such as Anguilla, high teacher emigration has resulted in the loss of skills and knowledge (after and during training) and has therefore impacted on the quality of teachers that are recruited and retained. The empowerment of headteachers and teachers in the recruitment process is also of importance in small territories like Anguilla. Jules (2008) suggests that this is a major challenge for the Caribbean, which has already lost five million of its people over the last 50 years due to economic migration.

What is needed is investment in the physical infrastructure of educational facilities, educational resources, and strategies to train and retain professionals in order to achieve quality teaching and learning. Collectively, such investment can positively influence pupil behaviour, achievement and belonging.

Educational strengths

Educational development in the Caribbean throughout the 1800s and 1900s had powerful alliances with the church. For countries like Barbados this was one aspect that contributed to rapid modernisation. Another feature is the deep-rooted desire of the local population for increased knowledge and skills development. Indeed, the value of education in Barbados (and other Caribbean countries) throughout this contemporary period remains strong, whereby capacity-building by the nation and for the nation is of utmost importance. As a result of the value placed on education, Barbados is able to proclaim high ranking in the Human Development Index (HDI) and is identified by the United Nations (UN) as first among developing countries. This capacity for development from within is crucial for other smaller Caribbean states when seeking to enhance their own unique education systems.

The Commonwealth Caribbean has many unique methods for adding value that are not always quantitatively measurable.

Community groups and church congregations enact social responsibilities that are compelling drivers for educational development. Certainly, such alliances create strong partnerships that induce educational provision and tackle a range of objectives and challenges. In The Bahamas this is most evident within special educational needs (SEN) provision. Catering for a scattered student population is challenging and therefore non-profit organisations, individuals and local companies provide funding and support for SEN organisations. The Bahamas Chamber of Commerce in its 2011 Stars in Business Program uniquely provided training and education beyond the organisation by offering local career days at secondary level. It is these examples that can add value from within an education system for societal development.

Finally, it is important to recognise the noteworthy development and achievements of the University of the West Indies (UWI). The role higher education institutions have undertaken when responding to regional and local demands is commendable. From its main campus sites at Mona, Cave Hill and St Augustine, the UWI seeks to make a significant contribution in the training of citizens who, in turn, often work in leadership roles throughout the Caribbean. From its establishment in Jamaica in 1948, the UWI has sought to contribute to the educational development of the Caribbean region. In more recent times the development of UWI open campuses has enabled access to tertiary education for populations outside of the main campus locations in Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad. Smaller Caribbean countries are therefore able to take advantage of online courses through virtual learning environments. For scattered populations, such as those in St Vincent and the Grenadines, this has provided much-needed access and opportunity. The UWI open campuses are educational advancements that serve to connect people and eliminate barriers to learning.

Ceasing all opportunities

Although the challenges facing education in the Commonwealth Caribbean are imperative, there are also substantive opportunities emerging.

First, it is well known that the Commonwealth Caribbean has high rates of emigration, which contribute to educational debates on the notion of 'brain drain'. However, the opportunity exists to not only capitalise on remittances from a Caribbean diaspora overseas, but to seek out the impact of skilled expatriates returning to the region. In Dominica, for example, there has been the establishment of a Dominica diaspora skills directory (Lubin and Serieux-Lubin, 2014). It is this community that has the potential to contribute and promote educational development in the Caribbean with unique global insights.

Second, strengthening information technologies can position the Caribbean region at the forefront of learning and teaching across a large region. This would cause international leaders to acknowledge the power and versatility of small states. Harnessing technologies is an investment that could be feasible for widespread populations in tax havens such as the Cayman Islands and the British Virgin Islands.

Finally, it is through new technologies that the nuanced politics of Caribbean identity and Anglocentric development can truly be debated and addressed. Education transformation is achievable

when Caribbean knowledge (both indigenous and foreign) is locally heard utilising global technologies. As stated by Emeritus Professor Errol Miller (1999), 'Caribbean education does not fit neatly into any of the prevailing stereotypes' (Paragraph 36). Consequently, it is 'outside the box' thinking, empowerment and investment that will enable substantive educational development.

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