

STAKEHOLDERS' PERSPECTIVE ON THE EFFICACY OF LARGE SCALE  
EDUCATION REFORM INITIATIVES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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## ABSTRACT

In the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, there is a high rate of illiteracy among the populace and a high dropout rate at the secondary level of education. This evaluative case study examined the effectiveness of the adopted strategic academic education reform initiative Vision 2020. The research questions that guided this study regarded the extent to which the goals and objectives of Vision 2020 were met. Qualitative Data were analyzed using constant comparative and coding methods to identify emerging categories. The NVivo software allowed the researcher to search for common words usage, attach codes to those selected textual patterns, and develop those commonalities into specific themes. The data collected supported the notion that in the short-run, the achievement of Vision 2020 in Trinidad and Tobago is minimal and identified that the quality, access and equity to a quality education among all students were not addressed. The participants in the study consisted of parents and administrators who completed the Quality Education Survey, and agreed to partake in one to one and group interviews. The findings revealed an increase in access at the primary and secondary levels for economically disadvantaged students. However, the study also revealed a lack of technological integration, an increased alienation of parents since the changes have been implemented, and the perception among parents that teachers are focusing more on policy than on personal interactions. The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago can likely achieve positive social change, and improve the standard of living of the underserved by increasing the use of technology and developing more collaborative programs with parents so that the vision and goals of the initiative can be actualized.

## STAKEHOLDERS' PERSPECTIVE ON THE EFFICACY OF LARGE SCALE EDUCATION REFORM INITIATIVES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

The primary purpose of this research article is to present the stakeholders' perspective on the efficacy of large scale reform using the information gathered in The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, concerning Vision 2020, the local school reform policy. The information identified within this research includes the positive and negative aspects of Vision 2020 and the recommended areas for improving, reorganizing, and influencing education reform policy to effect positive social change resulting in an improvement in the quality of the education system in Trinidad and Tobago.

Vision 2020 was created and designed to meet the overall educational challenges and needs of the youth in Trinidad and Tobago. The functions of this initiative include transforming the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago into a developed country by 2020 with updated, revised, organized, and strategically identifiable action steps to meet the initiative's goals and objectives.

This was accomplished by examining the information gathered from five randomly selected learning organizations to identify the positive and negative aspects of the educational reform initiative and make recommendations that can improve the educational system in Trinidad and Tobago. The 114 participants who were surveyed and interviewed in this research study consisted of parents, teachers, and administrators from primary and secondary school levels.

The results addressed the local and global challenges facing the developing country of Trinidad and Tobago. These challenges include providing access to learning

opportunities at every education level to all students regardless of gender, age, experience, or socioeconomic background and also improving and increasing the standard of living of the skilled labor force by reducing the high rates of poverty and illiteracy. Resolving these challenges and concerns ultimately responds to the competitive and changing standards of the global workplace. The results add to the dialogue on school reform and made a contribution to the sparse body of literature and research available on the impact and effectiveness of global educational change initiatives in developing countries similar to Trinidad and Tobago. This information can also help promote positive social change.

I was influenced to pursue this topic by several bodies of literature including general systems theory and its relation to organizations, organizational structure, and stakeholders. The primary foundation of the research was built on organizational change theory and its relation to organizational culture and the foundation for sustaining educational reform. This article highlights research on educational change initiative Vision 2020 in Trinidad and Tobago and explains the unique contribution of the results. International issues of large-scale educational reform in developing countries and locally in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago are also elucidated in an effort to make recommendations for effective and sustainable educational change. These recommendations will assist parents, teachers, and principals in fostering a more positive and sustainable school culture that could lead to higher student performance. Although there is no single solution that can cure poverty, people in Trinidad and Tobago and other developing countries who live in poverty need increased access to affordable and high-quality educational, technological, and employment opportunities.

The basic goal of large-scale reform is to create a new system of education that serves the purpose of the globally competitive society that developing countries such as Trinidad and Tobago wish to build for the future (Banathy, 1994, p. 3). Fullan (2002) concluded that effective large-scale school reform can accomplish long-term sustainable change with bottom-up ownership. Therefore, moving an educational organization forward in developing countries such as Trinidad and Tobago would require educators to understand that schools are complex interdependent social systems (Thornton et al., 2004).

Senge (1990) noted that learning institutions in Trinidad and Tobago and other developing countries are like spider webs. Each strand within the web is a part of a larger system, which allows for the creation of a larger web. If a strand is broken, the web loses its shape and function as a large system. In a school system, the interconnections of the system allow for the strength and resilience of its web. Learning institutions are composed of subsystems that interact, collect data, and process information to better the system. When an organization faces complex issues or when there is a situation where many people are involved, Senge posited that systems thinking is optimal for promoting learning and growth of the educational system. The majority of the teachers surveyed and administrators interviewed supported Senge's theory and considered the Vision 2020 initiative to be effective.

### Methodology

The qualitative data collection procedures in this study included a descriptive analysis of in-depth structured surveys, interviews, parent focus groups, archival data, and facility observations. Gathering detailed information from various sources increased

the potential outcome of an effective evaluation of the efficacy and impact of educational reform initiatives in Trinidad and Tobago. These multiple strategies were used because it is important to have more than one strategy for establishing quality and because by using more than one strategy, the validity of the research is strengthened.

The opinions and attitudes of major stakeholders within the population of the Trinidad and Tobago educational system were examined. This selected group included 99 teachers and 5 administrators employed at the five selected sample learning organizations and 10 parents of students who have attended and are attending the sample learning organizations in Trinidad and Tobago. The participants in these groups were randomly solicited and acquired from various sources.

The stakeholders participated on a voluntary basis, and before volunteering to contribute to this study, all potential participants were asked to read and sign a consent form. In conjunction with reading and signing the consent form, participants were also told that the researcher would not reveal the identities of any participants or organizations in this research study. The researcher ensured the confidentiality of this information was secure by using generic labels instead of the actual names of participants and organizations.

### Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

#### *Assumptions in the Study*

The following assumptions were made in this research study. First, it was assumed the instructors at the learning organizations were fully trained and capable of teaching the curriculum required for all academic disciplines because the ability of the educators can have a direct influence on the effectiveness of the reform policy. Second, it

was assumed none of the students at the institution were handicapped or learning impaired because the ability of the students to learn can have a direct influence on the effectiveness of the reform policy. In Trinidad and Tobago, students with special needs are generally not placed in mainstream classes. These assumptions were not an issue in this research study because they were addressed by both examining the hiring policies of the selected learning organizations concerning teacher qualifications and certification and the student roster at the selected learning organizations concerning students with special needs.

#### *Limitations in the Study*

The primary reason for limiting the study to five learning organizations was the 3-week time frame allocated to locating and interviewing participants. A secondary reason for the limitation on learning organizations was the limited financial resources available to successfully conduct the study. Using the resources of five learning organizations limited the number of participants to be interviewed. The interviewees included 5 administrators and 10 parents, which strengthened the validity of the survey data collected from the 99 teachers.

#### Conclusions

The conclusions of this research study will add to the understanding of large-scale systemic reform both on a local level within the developing country of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and globally. Ackoff (1941) stressed that if any problem situations arise due to a lack of communication within the system, the situations should be treated as a whole and not broken into parts that are treated independently of one another. In order for this systemic transformation to occur, there must be professional learning

communities at all levels within the district and across the schools. The school districts must be supportive and provide good leadership (Fullan, 2002).

Manning (2002) concurred that all levels of an educational system must be involved in planning and implementing change in a systematic way to allow children, the most important resource of a developing society such as Trinidad and Tobago, to have an optimal opportunity for educational success. According to Adkins (1999), there needs to be a focus on making changes to the system in developing countries such as Trinidad and Tobago by identifying areas of improvement and aligning feedback mechanisms with learning goals for students. After these changes are implemented, the achievements of students will be significant (Adkins). The majority of the teachers surveyed, administrator interviewed, and parents who participated in the focus group supported making changes to the education system in developing countries such as Trinidad and Tobago and considered the Vision 2020 initiative to be ineffective and unable to address the needs of the education system in Trinidad and Tobago.

The conclusions in this study are arranged by the research questions and the three themes (quality of education for all students, access to a quality education for all students, and equity among all students) that emerged from the data analyses process of determining the effectiveness of the educational reform initiatives to assess whether they are meeting the objectives and to examine the needs of the youths in Trinidad and Tobago. In this research study these final conclusions corroborated the findings that were identified.

*Research Question 1*

R<sub>1</sub>: To what extent is the 2020 educational reform in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago meeting its objectives of education for all through the provision of quality education at the primary and secondary levels?

*Teacher survey results.* The survey results for Research Question 1 reflected that the majority of the opinions and perceptions of the 99 teachers surveyed at the participating learning organizations in Trinidad and Tobago considered the Vision 2020 reform initiative to be effective and to have achieved the four major objectives it committed to from 2002 to 2006.

Over 50% ( $n = 204$ ) of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that the curriculum presented by the Vision 2020 initiative and implemented at the learning organizations effectively contributes to the educational system in Trinidad and Tobago (Theme 1: Quality of education for all students).

The study revealed that 46% ( $n = 96$ ) of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed compared to the 40% ( $n = 79$ ) who agreed or strongly agreed that the Vision 2020 initiative has effectively implemented technology and other teaching resources within the learning organizations in Trinidad and Tobago (Theme 1: Quality of education for all students).

Finally, 47% ( $n = 47$ ) of the participants agreed or strongly agreed compared to 38% ( $n = 38$ ) who disagreed or strongly disagreed that the Vision 2020 initiative has implemented an effective training program for all educators in Trinidad and Tobago (Theme 1: Quality of education for all students).

*Administrator interviews results.* The interview participants played an important role in the implementation of education reform policies; therefore, their perceptions and experiences must be considered. One way to measure the effectiveness of the reform policy at the selected learning organizations was to determine how many of the educators and parents at the five learning organizations in Trinidad and Tobago were negatively impacted by education reform. The analysis of interview data may reveal a high percentage of negative responses that could be interpreted to mean the reform initiatives at the learning organizations are not having the desired sustainable effect.

In this school they hired some more teachers so we were able to make the classes a little smaller. (A2) (Theme 1: Quality of education for all students)

More children getting the opportunity to go to school. Regardless of where they come from. (A3) (Theme 2: Access to a quality education for all students)

Programs like Vision 2020 has forced the government to face the problems of the underprivileged. This is important because Trinidad and Tobago is made up of all kinds of people and if it wasn't for large scale reform a lot of people will be left out. (A4) (Theme 3: Equity among all students)

Because we have smaller classes now the children getting more attention from the teacher. (A2) (Theme 1: Quality of education for all students)

The secondary school system has gotten some much needed attention. They building more schools and training the teachers to deal with some of the problems with the children. (A3) (Theme 1: Quality of education for all students)

The transition rate of African underprivileged students has increased. They are passing the CXC and moving on to good secondary schools. More of our students are prepared for the next level of their education because of early intervention. (A4) (Theme 2: Access to a quality education for all students)

We have created a strong relationship with the parents and local community with the implementation of a PTA and community outreach. (A5) (Theme 1: Quality of education for all students)

## *Research Question 2*

R<sub>2</sub>: What follow-up programs and steps can be implemented to help primary and secondary schools sustain successful educational change in the republic of Trinidad and Tobago?

The following responses reflect the attitude and perception of stakeholders toward the current reform initiative Vision 2020's impact on the primary and secondary learning environments, as well as the stakeholders' motivation to sustain the programs implemented by the Vision 2020 reform initiative.

*Teacher survey results.* More than 50% ( $n = 108$ ) of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that the Vision 2020 initiative has effectively implemented academically appropriate instruction that is evenly paced for all students and promotes interactive learning environments. (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

Over 50% ( $n = 92$ ) of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that the Vision 2020 initiative has not effectively addressed the need for parental involvement within the learning organizations in Trinidad and Tobago. (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

### *Administrator interview results.*

How is a whole school supposed to practice on two computers and use one set of textbooks in a class? Children need books to take home and study. Every child is supposed to have computers in the class to use. (A1) (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

I am going to say we shouldn't have programs because change cannot happen without new ideas. But we have had many new ideas that start off good and then when the government changes they forget them and start a next thing. So I say don't start nothing unless you going to finish. They playing with the people head, man. (A1)

Since Vision 2020 has been put into place they seem to be slow to act on all the concerns. They not giving the schools the resources to give the students a good education. We don't have enough books, computers or even desks so the priorities of this program is a little off. (A3)

That they do for everybody and not for the pockets of the politicians. They all have big houses in town and their children learning in a nice school be we have our children sitting in broken chairs and leaky classrooms. (A1) (Theme 3: Equity for all students)

I have been a teacher in Trinidad for over 20 years and to be honest the government keeps making all these promises and for a while things will be ok but then they go back to the way it was before. (A1)

The program has to fit the country not the country conforming to fit the program. This will make sure the program will last longer. (A5)

*Parent focus group results.*

My child has to get outside help which I have to pay for. (PFG1, P1) (Theme 1: quality education for all students)

The classrooms are horrible how [are] the children supposed to learn in a noisy room with no ventilation? (PFG1, P2) (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

This is a technology age but the school only has four computers for everybody and a library, what library the room have about four shelves and maybe thirty books on them. (PFG1, P3) (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

The school environment is dirty; this effects how the children feel about the school. (PFG2, P1) (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

They have more activities for the children to do but I don't think these things preparing the children for the CXC exam. This is what is important how the children suppose to learn math and science if they playing outside. (PFG3, P2). (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

The school don't listen to the parents when we talk. They act like we telling them what to do but we only want to help them. (PFG1, P3) (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

The things they teaching in class don't address each student's way of understanding information. (PFG1, P4) (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

The principal and the teachers need to include the parents in the planning process to help make it happen because we can do some enforcing from home to help out the school. (PFG2, P2) (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

The children need the resources to support the information the teachers given to them. We need more computers, books and after school programs. (PFG2, P3) (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

Communication has to be the key everybody must be a part of solving the problems together. (PFG1, P4) (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

More teachers need to be hired so the classes are not so crowded. Plus they need more money because some ah them does stay home because they have no incentive to come to work. (PFG1, P1) (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

The school need to train the teachers so that the students are more prepared for the next level. When it come to exams the children failing because they not ready. (PFG1, P2) (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

The teachers and principal need to make sure the programs and activities have a focus that connects with what the children learning in the classroom. (PFG3, P1) (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

### *Research Question 3*

R<sub>3</sub>: What steps can be taken to make educational reform initiatives more effective so that the educational needs of society in developing countries like Trinidad and Tobago can be successfully achieved?

The following responses reflect recommendations and suggestions for possible steps that may aid in sustaining and successfully implementing the goals and objectives of current and future reform initiatives in Trinidad and Tobago and other developing countries.

### *Parent focus group results.*

Make sure our culture and values are evident in the foundation of the program. (PFG1, P3) (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

Create a program or something that allows students to have a say so in the way the school functions this will create ownership they wouldn't destroy what they help build. (PFG1, P1) (Theme 1: Quality education for all students)

Systems thinking can effectively address the challenges facing educators and administrators in developing countries such as Trinidad and Tobago. In the 21st century learning institutions in Trinidad and Tobago, districts have rigid policies and procedures that often divide problems into individual components, which allow each part to be addressed appropriately. Fullan (2003b) posited that systems thinking will enable Trinidad and Tobago and other developing countries the opportunity to study different relationships among the subsystems, which in turn allows actions with the highest potential for continuous improvement as well as sustained change.

These thoughts support the need for much more research in the efficacy of educational reform initiatives in developing countries such as Trinidad and Tobago. A response that emerged often in this study was that the Vision 2020 initiative is slow to fund and implement programs at school districts where the socioeconomic status was low. Toffler (1990) analyzed the educational changes in Iran and posited that in developing countries freedom can be equated with education. Toffler concluded that to have growth, a society must move toward industrialization, which requires specialization and extensive training. Without education, an industrial society is unable to progress toward becoming a postindustrial society (Toffler). This concept was supported in the data results from the Quality Education Survey, administrators' interviews, parent focus group discussions and observations in the study.

The results revealed an increase in access at the primary and secondary levels for economically disadvantaged students due to the construction of additional schools and the implementation of a universal access-for-all policy. Teacher and principal training has improved ( $n = 47$  [47%]), school districts are hiring more certified teaching staff, and there is a decrease in untrained teachers among the eight school districts overall. The quality of the curriculum has also improved ( $n = 204$  [52%]), and the classes are smaller.

The need to identify issues and incorporate change continues to be a challenge facing Trinidad and Tobago and other developing countries. All levels of an educational system must be involved in planning and implementing change in a systematic way to allow children, the most important resource of a developing society such as Trinidad and Tobago, to have an optimal opportunity for educational success (Manning, 2002). This was evident in the most overwhelming response in this study from the teacher survey ( $n = 92$  [83%]), which revealed that parental involvement and communication between the home and school environment is extremely low within the primary and secondary schools. The lack of differentiated academic instruction ( $n = 108$  [54%]), technology, and other teaching resources ( $n = 96$  [46%]) are also a reported concern among the teachers. Finally the facility observations revealed an absence of appropriately constructed facilities such as doors on the stalls, toilet paper, soap, and indoor facilities.

The data collected on quality education in developing countries such as Trinidad and Tobago obtained from organizations such as the World Bank support the need for educational systems to increase their foundation in the knowledge of concepts, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and knowledge about teaching theories including applications in the classroom (Ministry of Education, 2004). Analysis

of the standardized test scores reports that at the primary level less than 50% ( $n = 3$ ) of the school districts reported scores at or above the national mean of 50 in all the language arts skill set areas. Over 50% ( $n = 6$ ) of the districts scored at or above the mean in at least 50% of the language arts skill sets in both Standards 1 and 3. At the secondary level, less than 50% ( $n = 3$ ) of the school districts had reported results at or above the national mean from 2001 to 2004 in mathematics and language arts. During the implementation of Vision 2020 initiative, more than 50% ( $n = 6$ ) of the school districts showed an increase in student performance.

Successfully developed monitoring systems are needed to evaluate programs such as Vision 2020 in Trinidad and Tobago and other developing countries. The results of these assessments will contribute to the sparse research in large-scale reform in developing countries. This will assist policy makers in determining the effects, including teaching standards put forth by globally competitive nations, that will allow the educational system to be successful by offering students a quality education (Hill, 2002; Louisy, 2004).

#### Significance: The Social Contribution of the Study

Before the study was conducted, the researcher developed a list of potential contributions using the literature review as a guide. The researcher identified the following factors that had potential to improve.

1. A clear moral purpose: commitment to high standards and the equal worth and success of every learner.
2. Developing a system that is coherent at every level.
3. Devolution of resources and power to the local level to build capacity to innovate and transform the education system, whatever the local context and challenges.

4. An intelligent accountability framework: providing the basis for targeted intervention in inverse proportion to success.
5. An emphasis on diversity, collaboration, partnership and innovation: to raise standards, extend choice and help equalize life chances.
6. Working with partners to create local and regional capacity for professional support and challenge, to strengthen informed professionalism and build capacity for continuous improvement. (p. 3)

These core principles were created by Fullan to assist Trinidad and Tobago and other developing countries to develop and create a learning culture of high performance. This study supported Fullan's (2001b) conclusion that the core principles should be utilized as a guide and strategy to systematically organize a system transformation at the school, local, and national level in developing societies such as Trinidad and Tobago.

#### Recommendation of Action and Further Study

##### *Moral Purpose*

Through the process of this study the researcher was able to corroborate the data from the in-depth interview results and surveys that the Vision 2020 plan was designed to provide holistic, challenging stimuli to all learners so they were equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills, and aptitudes to enter the labor market locally and globally (Manning, 2002).

##### *Developed System*

To ensure the education system in Trinidad and Tobago achieved the EFA goals and its own Vision 2020 objectives, the Ministry of Education streamlined its strategic plan focus further by committing to achieving four major objectives over the 2002-2006 period. These objectives were as follows:

1. Accessibility to educational opportunities for all.
2. Delivery of quality education to citizens at all levels of the education system.
3. Sustainable policy development for the education sector.
4. Continuous alignment of the strategic direction in the education system with objectives set for national development.

This study's findings from the in-depth interview results, facility observations, surveys, and archival data from standardized test reports indicated that these objectives were implemented effectively. The findings further indicated that the learning organizations need to genuinely encourage parental and community involvement as another vehicle for promoting student achievement. The few attempts of bridging the gap between the learning organizations and the community that have been implemented, have presented areas of concern between parents, teachers and administrators.

#### *Devolution of Resources and Power*

This study is only one indicator of the efficacy of the Vision 2020 initiative and due to the limitations of time and funding the researcher did not incorporate this variable within the study. This leaves room for a longitudinal study to be conducted that determines the effect of resources and power on the efficacy of large-scale reform in developing countries such as Trinidad and Tobago.

#### *Accountability*

The findings in this research indicated that the learning organizations in Trinidad and Tobago that want to effectively implement large-scale reform initiatives such as Vision 2020 need to reevaluate their accountability and checks and balances practices.

### *Diversity, Collaboration, Partnership, and Innovation*

Based on the findings of this study, learning organizations in Trinidad and Tobago have effectively implemented diversity and innovation into the school system. The findings of the study have revealed a need for more collaboration and partnership among community partners and learning organizations.

### Summary

The results of the study suggest that a tri-model concept of implementing change simultaneously among the three levels of the educational system is necessary to establish sustainable large-scale reform in developing countries such as Trinidad and Tobago (Barber, 2001; Fullan, 2001b; Newmann et al., 2000).

### *Social Change*

The study concluded that the Vision 2020 initiative in Trinidad and Tobago was somewhat successful and the implications for social change were twofold. On a local level, in Trinidad and Tobago all students regardless of age, experience, or socioeconomic background now have access to learning opportunities at every education level. On a global level, education is universally available and Trinidad and Tobago has made a step in the right direction. However, there are many areas in grave need of improvement such as the increased economic and social value of a skilled labor force able to respond to the competitive changing standards of the global workplace.

The areas where the Vision 2020 initiative failed to meet its objectives still need to be addressed. Steiner (2000) articulated that if Trinidad and Tobago and other developing countries failed to implement educational reform initiatives across all levels

of the educational system, then they had to face internal and external challenges toward change.

The internal and external challenges for Trinidad and Tobago if the Vision 2020 reform initiative performed poorly would be a decrease in career opportunities for citizens due to an untrained labor force. These challenges also negatively impact the growth and development of the society. Trinidad and Tobago has encountered developmental challenges such as poor economic health and educational and social inequalities, which has hindered its pursuit of developed country status.

These challenges are to some degree built into the existing structures and they included unlearning prior values and political bureaucracy from prior reform initiatives (Steiner, 2000). The study concluded that systems thinking is needed to effectively address the challenges facing educators and administrators in developing countries such as Trinidad and Tobago. According to Fullan (2003a), Trinidad and Tobago and other developing countries are committed to investing the resources and time at all levels of the educational system to create a culture of continuous assessment and improvement (Fullan). In the short-run, the achievement of Vision 2020 in Trinidad and Tobago is minimal. However, with a high degree of committed assistance from local and international organizations, more collaboration with parental groups, and sufficient amount of resources, combined with the logistics noted in this study, the task is surmountable for this developing country and others.

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