



The development of education indicators for measuring quality in the English-speaking Caribbean: How far have we come?



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ABSTRACT

Education evaluation has become increasingly important in the English-speaking Caribbean. This has been in response to assessing the progress of four regional initiatives aimed at improving the equity, efficiency, and quality of education. Both special interest groups and local evaluators have been responsible for assessing the progress of education and providing an overall synthesis and summary of what is taking place in the English-speaking Caribbean. This study employed content analysis to examine the indicators used in these education evaluation studies since the declaration of the Caribbean Plan of Action 2000–2015 to determine these indicators' appropriateness to the Caribbean context in measuring education progress. Findings demonstrate that the English-speaking Caribbean has made strides in operationalizing quality input, process, and output indicators; however quality outcome indicators beyond test scores are yet to be realized in a systematic manner. This study also compared the types of collaborative partnerships in conducting evaluation studies used by special interest groups and local evaluators and pinpointed the one that appears most suitable for special interest groups in this region.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The rise of education evaluation in the English-speaking Caribbean

Education evaluation has become increasingly important in the English-speaking Caribbean over the past 20 years. This rise in education evaluation studies has been due to Caribbean governments and scholars desiring to assess the outcomes of four key education initiatives that have taken place (Miller, 2000). These initiatives are the 1940s Universal Secondary Education (USE) reform; the 1990 Education for All (EFA) initiative; the 1997 Caribbean Plan of Action for the Early Childhood Education Care and Development initiative; and the 2001 Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) education development program. The 1940s USE began as part of the adult suffrage movement for equity in education. The remaining three initiatives were responses to the *Framework for Action* goals outlined by the United Nations conferences in Jomtein, Thailand, 1990 and later, Dakar, Senegal in 2000. All four initiatives in various capacities focus on improving

access to education, quality of education, human capital, and institutional capacity. They have also given rise to other successive initiatives such as Foundations for the Future 1991–2000, Pillars for Partnership and Progress 2000–2010, and the OECS Education Sector Strategy 2012–2021 (www.oecs.org) among others. More background on these initiatives can be found in the evaluation reports and studies of Leacock (2009), Miller (2000, 2009), the World Bank (2002), and at www.oecs.org.

The evaluations of these initiatives have been overseen by two main entities; special interest groups and local evaluators. Special interest groups provide financial support to this region and work collaboratively with task force units housed in local government ministries to conduct evaluations of these initiatives (Caribbean Community Secretariat, n.d.; Miller, 2000). The most visible of these special interest groups are the World Bank, United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the Inter-American Development bank (IDB). Others include, but are not limited to, US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Department for International Development (DFID).

Local evaluators also partner with the governments to evaluate these initiatives. The most visible of these are the Caribbean Development Bank and scholars associated with local universities. The Caribbean Development Bank conducts evaluations through

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partnership with task force units, local field researchers, and consultant teams (as noted in their Country Assessment Reports, caribank.org). Conversely, scholars generally work in partnership with other local or international scholars and evaluation firms. With the rise in evaluation studies, their sponsorship, and the government expenditure dedicated toward them, it is of interest to examine the extent to which these evaluation studies appropriately measure education progress in this region and, consequently, accurately represent the state of education. This study is designed to address this gap in knowledge regarding the validity and utility of the indicators used in these evaluation studies. By doing so, this study addresses the conclusiveness of what we currently know about education progress in this region.

Miller (2000) is a key evaluation report that summarizes education progress in the English-speaking Caribbean since the 1990 United Nations conference in Jomtein, Thailand. In response to this conference, the Caribbean member states had decided to improve the *quality* of basic education and increase *access* to early education and secondary education (Miller, 2000). Miller pointed out that a major limitation to evaluation studies up to that time point (that is, between 1990 and 1999) was that the indicators used to measure education progress were primarily quantitative and focused more on *access* to education at all levels rather than the qualitative aspects of education such as the systematic evaluation of interventions, physical conditions of primary schools, and teacher professional training. This was a limitation to evaluating education progress in this region because during that time the English-speaking Caribbean's focus was on quality as well as access. Therefore, according to Miller, the indicators up to that time did not fully measure the priorities of the region.

Just a few months before the 2000 United Nations conference at Dakar, Senegal, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), which includes the English-speaking Caribbean, updated national and regional education goals to be achieved by year 2015 which can be found in the Caribbean Plan for Action 2000–2015 (Caribbean Community Secretariat, n.d.). According to this plan, individual countries were responsible for: establishing early childhood care and education; improving teacher quality; improving technology use in the classroom and establishing a national education monitoring system; tracking the performance and accountability of stakeholders, national investments, and resources; involving civil society in the education processes and management; providing inclusive and relevant secondary, tertiary, and life skills education to youth and adults; promoting attitudes and behaviors characteristic of the ideal Caribbean person; and improving the quality of basic education (Caribbean Community Secretariat, n.d.).

The English-speaking Caribbean had also endorsed the six millennial developmental education goals set forth by the Dakar conference which occurred a few months later (Education Planning Division, n.d.). These goals included early childhood education, equity in education for disadvantaged groups, equitable access to education and life skills for youth and adults, increasing adult literacy, eliminating gender disparities, and improving education quality. Notably, the majority of the goals from the Caribbean Plan for Action and the Dakar conference overlap which speaks to the congruency of these goals for national strategies.

At the regional level, CARICOM was responsible for establishing a regional education monitoring system, defining measurable benchmarks for literacy, and assisting in developing valid and reliable quantitative and qualitative indicators to measure education progress (Caribbean Community Secretariat, n.d.). It is also important to recognize that a sub-region community of CARICOM, namely the OECS, also developed goals for education reform to be met by 2010. These can be found in the document Pillars for Partnership and Progress 2000–2010 (www.oecs.org). These goals were adopted by member states of OECS and not by the

entire CARICOM, therefore, they are not spelled out here. Thus, since 2000, there was a need for evaluators to delineate and utilize indicators that measured the above goals. The extent to which evaluators demonstrated awareness, alignment, and measured national and regional goals adopted by CARICOM in the year 2000 forms the crux of this study.

The identification of appropriate indicators for the English-speaking Caribbean hinges partly upon a clear understanding of its education context. More specifically, Neirotti (2012) asserts that an understanding of the *sociopolitical* context of a nation's development is necessary to fully understand the function of evaluation taking place. Neirotti describes the sociopolitical context as “trends in the development of a nation, forms in which the state works, the conditions of civil society and its relationship with the state as well as the shaping of public policy” (Neirotti, 2012, p. 9). In general, the sociopolitical context of Caribbean nations cannot be understood without an understanding of small state theory and post-colonial theory because these two heavily influence whole system reform there (De Lisle, 2012). Evaluators there ought to consider how small state theory and post-colonial theory apply to this developing region and be readily prepared to embrace or overcome factors that either promote or impede their work.

Within the realm of small state theory and post-colonial theory lie more obscure factors that shape the sociopolitical context of the English-speaking Caribbean. Due to the miniscule nation sizes of the English-speaking Caribbean, however, these factors remain obscure because this region is often grouped into the larger Latin America and Caribbean community who often face very different issues and challenges. Two of these more obscure factors: *trends in this region's education history* and *the condition of civil society* are critical to the practice of evaluation in this region. These factors are presented below to better acquaint the international community – in particular special interest groups who might not be as familiar with the English-speaking Caribbean context – with other aspects of the sociopolitical context of education in this region and to alert it to common misunderstandings about this region that threaten the validity and use of evaluation studies.

1.2. The historical, developmental and theoretical context of education in this region

The English-speaking Caribbean has a rather unique history for a developing region because it provided universal primary education to its citizens decades before the 1990 United Nations Jomtein, Thailand conference (Miller, 2000; Warrican, 2009). It had achieved gender parity in enrollment in primary education by the time of that conference as well. Only a handful of other developing countries had similar results at that time (Clarke, 2011), but what separates the English-speaking Caribbean from these is that their achievement was a regional accomplishment. By the follow-up United Nations conference in Dakar, Senegal, 2000, at least half of the countries that make up the English-speaking Caribbean had achieved universal secondary education and nine years later in 2009, only one third of them had yet to accomplish this (Miller, 2009; Warrican, 2009). Finally, the gap in education enrollment in basic education between the richest and poorest quintile of citizens who reside in even the poorer countries in this group is almost absent (World Bank, 2008, figure 6.1) which again is rare for developing nations. Taken together, this region has a trend in being forerunners in accomplishing education milestones as compared to other developing regions.

The classification scheme imposed upon the English-speaking Caribbean by the World Bank and UNESCO is a potential obstacle to evaluation studies conducted by special interest groups in this region. World Bank and UNESCO lump the English-speaking

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