

Achieving Excellence in Education

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Delivered by

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Introduction

Over the years, Barbadians have taken pride in their system of education and in the quality of life enjoyed by citizens of this small country of 166 square miles. Persons from abroad, especially those from more developed countries, have come to admire the high quality of scholars produced by this island nation whose people are mainly of African descent. Barbados, a British colony until it gained independence on November 30, 1966, boasts a literacy rate of 98 % and is currently ranked number 31 on the 2007/2008 UNDP Human Development Index (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>). Given the close relationship that exists between national development and education, these figures suggest that the education system in Barbados is certainly an excellent one.

In exploring the achievement of excellence in education, this presentation will define education as it relates to schooling. It will then examine three conceptions of excellence and discuss how these are applicable to education. After highlighting some features of education in Barbados, the presentation will suggest ways in which schools can achieve excellence by facilitating success for all students.

Education versus Schooling

At this point, it would be useful to delineate the terms *education* and *schooling*. The Free Dictionary (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/education>) defines education as: “1. the process of acquiring knowledge and understanding; 2. knowledge and understanding acquired through study and training; 3. the process of teaching, esp. at a school, college, or university; 4. the theory of teaching and learning.” *Schooling* is defined by the same dictionary as “1. instruction or training given at school; 2. education obtained through experience or exposure.”

One can deduce from these definitions that schooling and education are synonymous. Hence, the terms tend to be used interchangeably. However, it is possible to identify individuals who went to school, but got very little education or those who dropped out of school but their subsequent contribution to society gave evidence of their high level of education. It is therefore necessary to make a distinction between education and schooling.

According to Farrant (1980), “Education describes the total process of human learning by which knowledge is imparted, faculties trained, and skills developed” (p. 18). Thus, education is the broad caption that encompasses all forms of learning – both in school and out of school. These forms of learning can be categorised as informal, formal and non-formal education (Farrant, 1980; Best, Griffiths & Hope, 2000).

Informal education takes place from birth until death and is the form of learning through which one acquires knowledge, skills and attitudes from the family, church, mass media, ‘on the block’ or from the ladies washing clothes ‘down by the river side.’ On the other hand, formal education is equated with schooling, which is scheduled for a specified number of years within an institution, with a set curriculum, timetabled sessions, and trained professionals (Knight, 1998). In most countries, schooling is compulsory for young people from age five to sixteen years.

Non-formal education, which falls on the continuum between formal and informal education, is voluntary and flexible. Also known as continuing education, it is delivered through moderately structured programmes that include clubs, youth groups, part-time sessions, evening classes and correspondence schools.

Whatever the form of education, the aim is to ensure that individuals develop the competencies needed in order to function effectively in the real world. In examining the concept of excellence in education, this lecture will focus on formal education or schooling since this form of education is compulsory and can be more readily controlled. The questions to be answered then are “What is excellence?” and “How can a school or system of education achieve excellence?”

Conceptions of Excellence

According to the Free Dictionary, the root word *excel* is a verb that means “1. to do or be better than; 2. to show superiority.” Synonyms for excel are “surpass, exceed, transcend, outdo, outstrip.” Hence, excellence is defined as “the state, quality, or condition of excelling; superiority...the quality of being exceptionally good.”

The first conception of excellence suggests that a student who is exceptionally good or does better academically than another to whom he is compared is excellent. However, excelling may not always mean excellence or quality in the truest sense. For example, in a one day international cricket match played between the West Indies and England, the English surpassed the West Indies score and thus won the match. “Excellent!!” one would say. However, although the English excelled, their total score of 49 runs was considered to be a very poor performance. Similarly, a student may achieve the highest score at a particular school, but may be considered an average student when compared with top performers in other schools. Hence, one can excel but still not necessarily achieve excellence.

Excellence in the Barbados school system is often associated with schools that outperform other schools. The excellent schools at the primary level are those from which significant numbers of students with high marks in the Barbados Secondary Schools Examination (BSSEE) are selected to attend older secondary (grammar) schools. At the secondary level, the schools of excellence are seen as the ones that produce students who are awarded scholarships and exhibitions, usually those schools ranked at or near the top of the pecking order.

From a global perspective, the excellent or outstanding performers in any field of endeavour are the ones who really matter. For example, at the 2008 summer Olympic Games, recently held in China, Usain Bolt mattered because he broke world records and won the 100 and 200 metres sprint, and the 400 metres relay. The electronic and print media focussed on Bolt and other top performers such as Phelps, the champion in swimming. Those who gained silver and bronze medals were also given the opportunity to stand on the podium with the gold medal winners. But how often have other athletes, who also competed, been placed on the podium, given medals or awarded for their efforts?

While the media houses in Barbados highlight the outstanding students and high ranking schools, the other schools that “also ran” are often not mentioned, giving the impression that they are not excellent and do not really matter. Is education similar to the Olympic Games in which only top performers really matter? If the answer is, “Yes,” then the school system is excellent as it is. Would it be reasonable, then, to accept the elimination of significant numbers of students as an inevitable consequence of Olympic-style schooling? Certainly not, for “In education, unlike in the Olympics, our students are preparing for life, not one big test” (Scherer, 2008, p. 7).

Parents, teachers and students associated with prestigious schools expect high levels of performance. Hence, through self-fulfilling prophecy (Woolfolk, 2007), greater effort is extended by parents of high achievers, teachers and students themselves to ensure that high expectations are realised. What expectations do parents and teachers hold for students who are not high achievers or who do not attend top performing schools? What expectations do the students hold for themselves and how does self-fulfilling prophecy affect their performance? If schooling is concerned with winning medals, how can schools ensure that all students receive a good education? Can proponents of excellence in education be satisfied with the success of top achievers alone, when the students below the mean must also function in the same society?

The second conception of excellence is from the perspective of surpassing or exceeding one's previous performance. For example, if a student gets 77% in a mathematics test, his performance may be considered excellent, especially if his previous score was, say, 38%. Similarly, a school that surpasses its previous performance may be considered excellent in terms of the improvement gained. In this context, excellence refers to the quality of achievements realised in carrying out continuous improvement. Schools that continually improve their performance from year to year can be said to be excellent or schools of quality. Thus, excellence goes beyond satisfaction with past performances. To what extent are schools continually improving their performances?

The third conception of excellence has to do with the achievement of a certain standard or quality of performance. For example, a batsman who sets out to make 100 runs or more in a cricket match may be considered to have put in an excellent performance when he achieves this objective. Similarly, a school can set certain challenging but achievable goals or standards for students and then classify them as excellent on achieving the goals. However, the goals must be relevant to the needs of the society and the learners involved (Hawes & Stephens, 1990). A school that achieves the set goals in a manner that does not waste available resources is said to be both effective and efficient, and as such is classified as an excellent school (Beare, Caldwell, & Millikan, 1989).

According to Sergiovanni (2006), a school of quality or an effective school is one that produces a desired effect, but this could depend on what the goals are and who is judging the goodness of the school. He referred to the research of Mac Beth and associates who surveyed 638 respondents associated with ten high schools in England and Wales. The findings revealed that stakeholders tended to list indicators of quality that were of greatest concern to their interest group.

For example, teachers listed good communication among staff members, good staff development and a good working environment as qualities of a good school. Pupils saw a good school as possessing a friendly atmosphere in which pupils were nice to each other and everyone was treated fairly. Parents identified a welcoming and friendly atmosphere, caring staff and good discipline as characteristics of a good school.

Indicators of a good school identified by senior management were pupils' safety, cooperation among all members of the school community working together toward clear objectives and the provision of high quality information to parents and visitors. Support staff listed good up-to-date resources, clean, comfortable classrooms and credit given where credit is due. Members of the boards of management saw a good school as one having an excellent reputation with the local community, strong leadership from senior

management and a happy welcoming environment. It is interesting to note that each interest group focused on concerns which its members considered a priority.

Sergiovanni (2006) observed that the terms “good” and “effective” were often used interchangeably to describe the quality of a school. He advised that the use of the term “effective” would be more appropriate than “good,” which was seen as more subjective. He defined an effective school as one “whose students achieve well in basic skills or basic competency standards as measured by achievement tests” (p. 191). However, certain factors must be present to enable the majority of students to achieve the requisite competencies or essential outcomes.

In discussing research on school quality, Sergiovanni (2006, p. 196-197) cited Duthweiller’s synthesis of selected school characteristics. The list included the following qualities:

- Student centred
- Academically rich programmes
- Instruction that promotes learning
- Positive school climate
- Collegial interaction
- Extensive staff development
- Shared leadership
- Creative problem solving
- Involvement of parents and the community

In another study on school quality, Lunenburg and Ornstein (2004, p. 409-410) described effective schools as having the following characteristics:

- A safe and orderly environment
- A clear school mission
- Instructional leadership
- A climate of high expectations
- High time on task
- Frequent monitoring of student progress
- Positive home-school relations

The National Education Association (NEA) has also published standards for determining school quality. The following six criteria were listed on the NEA website (<http://www.nea.org/schoolquality/index.html>):

- 1 Shared understanding and commitment to high goals
- 2 Open communication and collaborative problem solving
- 3 Continuous assessment for teaching and learning
- 4 Personal and professional learning
- 5 Resources to support teaching and learning
- 6 Curriculum and instruction that are student-centred

It is interesting to note that the presence of high achieving students was not mentioned as a major indicator of school quality. Yet, the media and the general public in Barbados focus mainly on top achievers when judging school quality. It is believed that if a school sought to develop the criteria listed above, its students would certainly perform well. However, the practice of rating schools based on the performance of high achievers alone ignores other factors that affect the quality of a school, but the context in which this tradition has developed must be understood.

Elitism and Excellence

Many citizens of Barbados hold as sacred the British model of formal education, which the country has adopted and followed for many years. According to Winch and Gingell (2004), the British model of schooling “had, as its aims, the maintenance of a political elite with the skills, attitudes and character to run the British Empire” (p. 8). Thus, schooling in the British model focused primarily on a conservative philosophy that promoted the ranking and sorting of students to justify the selection of the elite.

A brief overview of philosophy of education (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2004) indicated that conservative or traditional philosophies of education, such as perennialism and essentialism, seek to educate the rational person and cultivate the intellect. The conservative classroom is teacher-centred and focuses on covering the syllabus. Little or no provision is made for catering to students’ interests and individual needs. On the other hand, contemporary philosophies such as progressivism and reconstructionism take a pragmatic approach by focusing on the application of knowledge to real life situations. In this way students learn to work together to promote democratic social living and seek to improve society. The contemporary classroom is student-centred and engages learners in research-based, co-operative activities that foster the development of higher-order thinking skills.

In education systems that are patterned after the British model, the elite are educated in prestige private schools or the best public grammar schools, i.e. those considered as excellent. Next in line on the education ladder are individuals who would become professionals and semi-professional and managers – the middle class. The masses near or at the bottom of the education ladder, mainly persons from families of lower socio economic status, are provided with a basic education to help them function as loyal subjects and subservient employees. Michael Apple (2004) has argued that hegemonic education policies were designed by dominant groups within the society to maintain the status quo. Research has also pointed up a strong relationship between a student’s educational achievement and the socioeconomic status of his family (Haralambos, Holborn & Heald, 2004).

Despite hegemony and other theories, arguments have been put forward to suggest that the British model of education provided many Barbadian citizens with the opportunity to achieve excellence. However, there is a belief that an elitist system, dominated by competition, must fail people in order to legitimize the selection process. This is often accomplished through streaming.

The practice of streaming students, i.e. grouping by level of ability, is a feature of the British model. However, two separate studies conducted by the University of Sussex (2007) show that sorting or streaming school children is neither an accurate way to assess ability nor is it beneficial to their learning. The researcher, Professor Boaler, revealed that children in mixed ability mathematics classes outperformed those grouped by ability. Another study by Sussex researchers found that children were placed in ability groups according to social class – those in the middle class were more likely to be assigned to higher sets in the stream than those from the lower socioeconomic bracket. In such a system, students in classes at the bottom of the stream are very unlikely to achieve excellence.

An elitist model of education was deemed suitable when the economy was based on agriculture and manufacturing. The wealthy elite directed a cadre of educated

professionals and managers who in turn oversaw skilled persons and large numbers of unskilled manual labourers from the working class. In this modern era, however, Barbados has developed a service-based economy that needs workers who are critical thinkers, problem solvers and skilled in using various technologies. In addition, the demands of the life in the twenty-first century require individuals to be resourceful and creative in addressing the many challenges they will encounter. To what extent is an elitist model of education still applicable in today's economic environment, especially as nations around the world face financial crisis?

While students in Barbados from all social classes have had access to free secondary education for more than four decades, indications are that some persons see the schools as serving the purpose of sorting and ranking students so that the brightest might be selected. Such persons don't hold much hope for certain students. Hence, end-of-year test scores and results of formal examinations confirm elitists' anecdotal observations. Inevitably, the majority of students whose performance is unsatisfactory are mainly those with a working class background and are not considered by elitists to be excellent students.

An examination-driven environment makes covering the syllabus the main focus of instruction in an attempt to expose students to the topics that might be tested. Thus, less time is available for engaging students in authentic projects that would build critical thinking skills. As the examination period draws near, some topics that are unlikely to appear on the test paper are glossed over and others omitted entirely. Anecdotal feedback from teachers indicates that this practice is particularly evident at the primary level in science, social studies and the arts.

At both primary and secondary levels, extra classes are often held during vacation periods to help students cover the important topics. When results are published, some excellent, high-performing students report that they were sent to 'lessons' (private tuition) held after school and on weekends to help them get ahead. One can imagine the consequence for students whose parents cannot afford to pay for 'lessons' or who do not see the value of having children attend additional classes.

Recent governments have acknowledged the impact of high stakes testing on teaching and learning and have recognized the need to enhance the quality of the education system. The Government of Barbados (1993) stated that the provision of quality education was the biggest challenge facing the primary education system at the time. It acknowledged, "There is a growing recognition that the Barbados Secondary Schools' Entrance Examination (BSSEE), better known as the "Eleven Plus", exerts adverse effects on curriculum, instruction, pupil achievement and, ultimately, quality of education" (p. 68).

In analysing the impact of the Eleven Plus Examination, the Develop Plan noted that, "Preparation for the BSSEE therefore tends to be associated with restrictive teaching methodologies, disproportionate time allocated to Mathematics and English on the curriculum, neglect of pupils with learning difficulties, and limiting the creative potential of pupils" (Ibid). These negative outcomes certainly presented challenges to the achievement of excellence by many students and schools over the years.

Education Reform

In 1995, the then Government raised the issue of school quality in the White Paper on Education Reform by stating, “*The challenge for Barbadian education is therefore one of quality rather than access. The theme, “Each One Matters – Quality Education for All” is intended to shift the focus of education in such a way that the educational needs of each individual citizen are carefully addressed*” (Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs and Culture, 1995, p. 6).

The reforms outlined in the White Paper were intended to provide quality education for all by making each student matter. The reform initiatives included teacher empowerment, curriculum reform, institutional strengthening and addressing the issues associated with children at risk. However, the document also stated, “*The Ministry proposes that the “Common Entrance” Examination should remain as a measure of what children have attained at the end of primary schooling since it is perceived as the “fairest” way by which children’s attainment levels can be assessed*” (Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs and Culture, 1995, p. 67). It would be interesting to determine whether the negative outcomes associated with the BSSEE, as indicated in the Development Plan, have been minimized by the implementation of the reform initiatives.

The philosophy of education in Barbados was influenced by the principles advanced in the 1997 CARICOM Heads of Government Summit in Montego Bay, Jamaica. In addition to acquiring multiple literacies, products of the education system were expected to exhibit high levels of self confidence and self esteem, demonstrate critical thinking skills and display desirable values associated with family, community and the environment. Curriculum reform, based on a contemporary philosophy, was therefore seen as the process whereby the desired competencies could be achieved (Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs and Culture, 2000).

In its efforts to further enhance the reform initiatives articulated in 1995, the Ministry of Education, Youth Affairs and Culture (2000) incorporated aspects of Dewey’s progressivist philosophy in the revised curriculum. Teachers were required to use various technologies and student-centred methodologies to foster the development of high level thinking skills. However, the results of the BSSEE in 2008 raised concerns about unsatisfactory student performance on the sections of the test that required them to demonstrate critical thinking skills. Are teachers engaging students sufficiently in projects and other activities intended to foster the development of higher order cognitive skills or are they focusing on direct teaching methods to cover the syllabus?

Given the explosion of knowledge made available through various media, the teacher should no longer function as a “sage on the stage,” appearing to possess all the knowledge that is applicable to a given subject area. He must adopt the position of a “guide on the side” facilitating student learning through constructivist approaches (Woolfolk, 2007). These approaches would certainly provide opportunities for larger numbers of students to achieve success in critical thinking. However, several classrooms are still dominated by teacher-centred methodologies.

The theory of *constructivism*, associated with Piaget’s stages of cognitive development, suggests that knowledge is not passively received but is constructed as the learner undergoes certain experiences (Noddings, 1998). By actively engaging in experiments, investigations and inquiry, the student is able to participate in his own learning and thereby add meaning to classroom experiences. The knowledge thus

constructed is considered to be authentic and more likely to be retained than what is dispensed by a teacher during a classroom lecture. This approach would certainly enhance success for most students and promote excellence in education.

Spring (1999) rejected the notion that knowledge is rigid factual information and that learners, as sponges, are waiting to soak up the knowledge that is inherent in the curriculum. Rather, knowledge development is seen as a process whereby people interpret their world by adding meaning to their experiences. In examining the work of Dewey, Spring (1999) discussed the role of critical thinking in the development of knowledge in a democratic society. He endorsed Dewey's notion that knowledge is socially constructed as people seek solutions to everyday problems through interaction with others. Hence, the responsive curriculum is designed to provide opportunities for learners to interact with each other as they use critical thinking skills to solve problems and construct knowledge in meaningful ways. Thus, constructivist approaches promote cooperative learning (Slavin, 2006).

Constructivism presents a formidable challenge to an elitist system that is evaluated primarily by competitive summative tests. Popham (2008b) made a distinction between formative and summative evaluation based on the work of Scriven. Formative evaluation is defined as judgments made about a programme while it is in progress so that adjustments for improvement could be made before the end of the programme. Summative evaluation, on the other hand, constitutes judgments made at the end of a programme to determine whether the programme should be continued or terminated.

Summative evaluation, stated in the form of scores or grades, has been the basis for making value judgments about students' achievements at the end of their school programme. In an elitist system, the evaluation data are used to determine how well students or schools performed in relation to each other. Schools or students are classified as excellent based on their position in the pecking order. However, while a score of 90% or a grade of A suggests that a student performed well, it does not necessarily indicate what he or she can do. Constructivist educators have been placing greater emphasis on assessment, which has to do with the collection of evidence on what learning has taken place (Popham, 2008a).

Promoting Excellence through Assessment Reform

One major change that would make a difference in reducing failure and promoting excellence among students is a change in grading practices (Reeves, 2008). The grading practices that rank students and show how they compare with others, based on a one-shot test, are not the best for enhancing learning. The single summative test such as the BSSEE, is associated with poor teaching, student misbehaviour, low motivation and fear, and thus "exerts adverse effects on...(the) quality of education" (Government of Barbados, 1993, p. 68). Since school administrators and teachers are mandated to comply with government-mandated, high-stakes testing, they must find others ways to assess students in order to reverse the negative trends.

In the constructivist classroom, assessment plays a critical role in the teaching-learning process as it helps both teacher and student to determine what is being learned so that strategies could be implemented to improve learning and instruction. Thus, assessment during instruction, also known as formative assessment or educative assessment is critical (Wiggins, 1998). To foster success for all students, teachers must

not focus merely on covering the syllabus in preparation for the summative test but on using formative assessment for learning, intended to ensure that all students are moved forward in their learning experiences.

According to Wiggins (1998), two major principles of educative assessment are authentic tasks and feedback. Authentic tasks, associated with performance assessment, give students the opportunity to use higher order thinking skills to apply their knowledge to real life problems. Feedback lets the students know how well they are doing and provides opportunities for improving instruction and learning. In this way, both teacher and student can monitor their progress and adjust strategies as needed to maximize learning.

Convinced that teachers need to take greater responsibility for student achievement, Popham (2008a) has been an advocate of the use of classroom assessment to monitor and facilitate learning. His passion for formative assessment was inspired by the work of Black & William (1998) whose research highlighted its value as a most powerful means of maximizing student learning. Formative assessment is thus seen as the means by which teachers can enhance student learning and promote quality education.

In his recent publication entitled "Transformative assessment," Popham (2008b) argued that teachers should seek to transform their instructional approaches with a significant infusion of formative assessment. In a professional development workshop mounted by ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) on 23 October 2008, he was critical of the ways in which many tests were used. He argued that it was unfair to test a student on material that was not taught and then use the results to judge the student's level of ability or compare him with others. He deduced that many children hated school because they were constantly being compared with other students rather than having their learning needs addressed.

Recommending the widespread use of formative assessment, Popham (2008b) advised that it should not take the form of rigorous tests but should consist of carefully devised questions and other tasks designed for children to demonstrate their learning on material that was taught. The teacher should not assume that students understood the material because he taught it or because they said they understood. By using various formative assessment techniques, the teacher could determine exactly what students understood (Fisher & Fray, 2007). The adoption of such an approach to assessment should enhance student success and thus make every student matter.

In Barbados, several primary schools require all students in a year group to write a common test at the end of the term or year. Some teachers have voiced concerns that this practice sets up certain students for failure since the tests contain material not taught to students in the slowest classes. Yet, the test is required; the justification being that all students must eventually write the BSSEE and parents should not be given the impression that their children are high-flyers when they get high marks on easy work. Nevertheless, how does the practice of giving common tests affect the less able students and their teachers?

Popham (2008b) would see such a situation as creating distrust. He stressed the importance of establishing trust in the formative assessment classroom. In this regard, the teacher must help students believe that he is investing in having all of them succeed, not just the "bright" ones. Secondly, students need to believe that the assessment results will be used for improving their learning and not for allocating grades or determining who is

smart and who is not. Finally, students need to believe that the teacher is genuinely seeking their collaboration in helping them to assume responsibility for their own learning.

In Popham's view, "...to delay in expanding the use of formative assessment short-changes our students educationally and, thereby, demeans our profession" (Popham, 2008b, p. 19). In the interest of enhancing student learning and eventually, school quality, he offered the following four levels of formative assessment as steps in the process from the level of the teacher to that of the whole school (Ibid, p. 49):

1. Teachers' Instructional Adjustments: Teachers collect evidence of student learning and adjust their instruction to improve effectiveness.
2. Students' Learning Tactic Adjustments: Students use evidence of their skills and knowledge to decide whether to adjust their learning procedures.
3. Classroom Climate Shift: The consistent application of formative assessment transforms the classroom to one in which assessment seeks to maximize learning rather than merely assigning grades.
4. Schoolwide Implementation: An entire school adopts formative assessment through the use of professional development and teacher learning communities.

Robert J. Marzano, a prolific writer for ASCD, rejected the widely held view that, since student achievement was overwhelmingly influenced by home background, schools could do little to provide success for all (Marzano, 2003). He cited cases where schools, whose students came from impoverished backgrounds, made significant gains in learning and achievement. In fact, he saw quality schools as those that help working class children to excel. Based on his analysis of 35 years of research, Marzano (2003) identified eleven factors that influenced student academic achievement and placed them under three broad headings: school-level factors, teacher-level factors and student-level factors.

School-level factors include school policy decisions and initiatives regarding the nature of the curriculum, assessment feedback, and parental and community involvement. Teacher-level factors encompass instruction and classroom management. Student-level factors have to do with home atmosphere, prior learning and level of motivation. If schools merely carried on business as usual, then home background factors would determine how well students performed.

Marzano (2003) argued that the implementation of specific school-level policies and teacher-level practices designed to improve student achievement could significantly impact the student-level factors and maximize learning for all. School quality could be enhanced if school districts and administrators became committed to a system of feedback to individual students, effective teaching in every classroom, and building background knowledge for all students. Further details of the three commitments are outlined below (Marzano, 2008).

Commitment #1 has to do with the development of a system of individual student feedback which involves tracking student progress and using report cards that document specific learning outcomes. Commitment #2 seeks to ensure that there is effective instruction in every classroom by having teachers observe master teachers and monitoring their individual teaching styles. Commitment #3 seeks to build the background knowledge of all students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This involves the development of a manageable set of concepts and skills relative to each

level. Emphasis should be placed on ensuring that each student masters the concepts and skills that are listed at his level. In this way, both teachers and students would be aware of what is expected and seek to achieve the objectives.

Although academic achievement is important, “There’s more to excellence than reading, writing, and arithmetic” (Sternberg, 2008, p. 14). In addition to the traditional three Rs: reading, writing and arithmetic, schools should focus on another three Rs: *reasoning, resilience and responsibility*. These Rs facilitate the development of critical thinking skills, persistence in achieving goals despite obstacles and engaging in various activities that promote the common good.

Excellence in education will also include social justice and service learning (Westheimer & Kahne, 2007). Academic achievement alone without fairness and reasonableness is not excellent. As students learn the content in the curriculum, they must develop attitudes and skills that would enable them to make the world a better place. A service oriented curriculum would also include opportunities for students to offer service to others through community based projects. Hence, paper-pencil tests should not constitute the sole means of evaluating student progress.

Factors that facilitate the achievement of excellence can also be identified when countries are compared. Despite the fact that students in Singapore and Finland (aged 6 years and 7 years respectively) start school later than those in other territories, these two countries are rated as the top performers in education by Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Sclafani, 2008). Both countries have a culture of high performance at both the primary and secondary levels. Also, highly qualified teachers are recruited and they must engage in on-going professional development activities. Although there are national standards in Finland, there is no widespread standardized testing and teachers are free to develop lessons and assessments that cater to the needs of their students. At the primary level in Singapore the core curriculum focuses on “problem solving, creativity, project-based work, cocurricular activities, character education, and community service” (Sclafani, 2008, p. 26).

Schleicher & Stewart (2008) also compared the performances of students across various countries and found excellence to be associated with four key factors: high universal standards, accountability and autonomy, strengthened teacher professionalism, and personalized learning. High standards include specific achievable outcomes for all students at each grade level. Teachers are held accountable based on the extent to which they help students to achieve the standards. Through professional development opportunities, teachers develop the competencies needed to deliver high quality instruction that is designed to meet the learning needs of each student. The presence of these key factors increase the likelihood that schools will achieve excellence. The researchers also concluded that “a disadvantaged socioeconomic background does not necessarily result in poor performance in school” (p. 48).

Achieving Excellence in Local Schools

In preparation for this lecture, this presenter used a survey to investigate the views of Barbadian teachers on the extent to which they would describe their school as excellent. Participants were asked to respond to 18 statements on selected characteristics of school quality identified by the NEA. They were requested to indicate whether they

strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed with each statement in relation to the school to which they were attached. Responses were rated on a scale from + 2 (strongly agree) to – 2 (strongly disagree).

Of the 48 (forty-eight) persons responding to the school quality survey, 27 (56 %) rated their school above zero, one at 0 and 20 (42%) below. The range was -1.33 to 0.67 and the mean was 0.013 out of a possible rating of 2, which is equivalent to a score of less than 1 %. This suggests that respondents do not see their school as exhibiting the characteristics of quality identified by the NEA. While the findings of this pilot study cannot be generalized for all teachers across the school system, it raises some concerns. To what extent do teachers' perceptions of the quality of the school affect the quality of their instruction and the subsequent performance of the students? Further research should also seek to determine the factors teachers use to judge the quality of schools and the reasons for their conclusions.

The following illustration gives an example of how persons can be motivated or demotivated by perceptions of excellence.

Mr Bolton, the general manager of a company, wanted to motivate his salespersons to improve their performances by the end of the quarter. He promised a Caribbean cruise to the person with the highest dollar value in sales. To motivate the agents, he posted on the notice board a picture of a horserace accompanied by a picture of a cruise ship.

On seeing the posters, Mr Skinner, a consultant, quietly advised Mr Bolton that while the award would benefit the winner, it could demotivate other salespersons since a certain employee was already ahead in sales. Mr Skinner advised Mr Bolton that it would be far more beneficial to the company and to the salespersons to set a challenging but achievable standard and award all those who reached it.

If a selective system of education is preferred, then it is inevitable that the evaluation of student progress will focus on ranking, sorting and selecting students. In such a case, only top performers will matter. Teachers will be driven to drill students on past test papers, thereby making the school appear to be a “paper factory” and excellence will be an elusive dream for many schools and most students. As in the Olympic Games, a few will medal while the majority that “also ran” would never really matter.

Barbados already has a written philosophy of education which places emphasis on making each student matter. Dedicated teachers extend much effort in delivering instruction. However, all schools must ensure that the content of the curriculum and assessment procedures give each student a chance to experience success. Since assessment drives the curriculum, formative assessment should be used to improve learning for all students and motivate them to become successful learners. Tests should include only material covered during instruction. The intention is to maintain educational quality by ensuring that students do not move from one class level to another with deficiencies that accumulate and hinder their learning (Marzano, 2008b). This also serves to motivate teachers to deliver student-centred instruction since their performance would be judged, not by the raw test scores of their students, but by the value added to each learner's accomplishments.

Emphasis should be placed on pre-service training, which would ensure that all teachers selected are well qualified to deliver high quality instruction. Teacher training

would also need to be congruent with the practices desired at the school level. Each school administrator must be knowledgeable about the best practices required and be prepared to support and monitor their implementation. On-going professional development must be encouraged, but some could be school based rather than outsourced to a college or university. In each school, teachers with specialised skills and knowledge should share their expertise with colleagues through team planning or school-based seminars (Best, 1999). Follow-up systems should be put in place to ensure that the desired practices are being implemented.

Schools should also be guided by research-based characteristics intended to satisfy their quest for excellence. These should include:

1. A clear mission and shared vision that emphasises success for all students
2. A student-centred curriculum delivered through constructivist approaches
3. Frequent monitoring of student progress using formative assessment coupled with reports that document the achievement of specific goals
4. Teacher evaluation and staff development that seek to improve the effectiveness of instruction
5. Positive relations between the school, parents and the community

One view of excellence is that it is a decision or choice to excel (Orlick, 2008). Hence, the person who wishes to achieve excellence would need to focus on this goal and consistently take the actions that would facilitate success. Ultimately, the achievement of excellence in education will depend on the interpretation of what is meant by excellence. If excellence is attributed to top performers only, then only the minority will be seen as excellent. If excellence means continuous improvement, then all can seek to achieve excellence by enhancing their performance on an ongoing basis. If excellence means reaching set standards, then all can achieve excellence if the relevant systems are put in place. The major obstacle to achieving excellence, then, would be the resistance to change, i.e. the strong desire to hold on to tradition. Should the achievement of excellence by all students be sacrificed by the elitist thirst for a pecking order?

Barbados already has an excellent education system that produces scholars. However, the concern about the unsatisfactory performance of many students has established the need to make some essential changes. Those persons who believe that God endowed each child with various talents and abilities would argue that the school has a responsibility to facilitate the development of those gifts to their fullest potential. As such, no child should be classified as a failure. Hence, educators who desire to achieve excellence in their school must take a bold step to change methods of testing and grading to make learning a priority for all students. They must, like John Cumberbatch, be courageous enough to take the risk of challenging the status quo in their quest to achieve excellence.

Following are some vignettes which offer ideas for making each student matter and fostering excellence.

1. Little Johnny was excited as his teacher showed the children how to plant peas in wet tissue paper placed in jars, which were then put on the window sill for observation. One day, Johnny was the first to exclaim that one of the seeds had extended a root. The other children came running to see the spectacle. With excitement, they made daily observations to see when the leaves would emerge. The children also experimented by letting two jars remain dry on the window sill and placing two other jars in the dark cupboard. They recorded their observations on conditions of germination and each step of the process. The seedlings were subsequently planted in the school's garden as the observations and recordings continued.
2. The teacher took the children on a walk around the school compound and in the surrounding community to observe how litter was discarded. On returning to the classroom, the children identified reasons why people discarded litter indiscriminately and discussed the possible consequences of this practice. Some wrote letters to companies in the neighbourhood to request assistance in providing bins for the proper disposal of litter while others prepared posters to encourage adults and other children to dispose of litter in the bins provided.
3. At one secondary school, students were taken on hikes through the community surrounding the school during a series of geography lessons. In small groups, their task was to draw a map of the area highlighting certain features.
4. The foreign language class made several visits to hotels and other places where they could meet and chat with tourists in the target language.

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