

Moving towards equitable education: A *brief* look at the FBE exit exams

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The continued use of sixth-grade elementary exams, particularly the FBE exit exams in St. Maarten, pose a real threat to the goal of education for all. Such exams preserve hegemony within the society ensuring that only a certain number of students receive a high-quality education. Equity in education is based on the idea that all students should be exposed to inclusive quality education in which their background plays a limited to a negligible role in their educational outcomes. Equitable education systems provide students with the support needed to achieve a minimum level of competency. I argue that to achieve equitable education, the reliance on sixth-grade testing to determine students' educational future and access to quality high school education needs to be changed. However, changes must rely on an understanding of the beliefs and culture of the implementors of the change.

The administering of an exam at the end of the sixth grade is commonplace in Caribbean education systems. St. Maarten is no different. However, in an education system that on paper professes equitable education, there needs to be an honest evaluation of the benefits of a standardized exam that excludes a large portion (mainly poor and marginalized) students from quality secondary education. Here, I will give a brief discussion of the importance of equitable education and will highlight how sixth-grade exams are counterproductive to this ideal. The paper will use the Foundation based education (FBE) exit exam that is administered in St Maarten as the context for the discussion and will propose an intermediary path towards real equitable education practices as the educational culture slowly changes its beliefs towards an appreciation for actual *education for all*.

Foundation Based Education and Equitable education

Equitable education systems value fairness and inclusion. Such systems aim at providing high-quality education to all students regardless of social or economic factors. The highest performing education systems are those that combine high-quality education with education equity (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2012). In these education systems, family background plays a limited role or has no significant impact on student learning outcomes. Poor students are as likely as rich students at achieving high educational outcomes. An equitable education system ensures that quality education is a priority. In fact, in any education system where there are marked differences in schools, that

education system is not equitable. Parents in an equitable education system feel comfortable sending their children to any school since quality is guaranteed across the board.

These principles are built on the Rawlsian idea that the least advantaged within a fair society must be placed in the most advantageous position possible. If disadvantaged students are to reach their full potentials, then any inequality in wealth in society must be addressed by the social system (Rawls, 1971). For Rawls (2001), the social and economic inequalities should “be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society” (p. 43). A just society would then be one that recognizes that some of its members are more economically disadvantaged than others and therefore, places the social structures to address this. This means that resources should be distributed so that our most disadvantaged students should receive the necessary support.

The FBE education system was implemented to address such inequities. The rationale for the implementation of FBE was that the education system at that time was not meeting the needs of the Antillean student- St. Maarten was part of the Netherlands Antilles at that time. The old system was considered traditional in which students after completing elementary education were streamed into vocational or academic secondary education. The old system was a graded, curriculum-centered system in which schools were mainly responsible for producing the curriculum (George, 2016). This was a highly inequitable system in which the students’ futures were determined from an early age. Such a system tends to preserve inequalities in social structures as more advantaged students would possess the resources and social capital to gain entrance into the higher quality academic secondary schools. It can be argued that these basic structures still exist in the current FBE education system.

FBE consists of multiple innovations. It uses ideas from multi-age education, nongraded education, experiential learning, process-based instruction, and differentiated instruction (Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sports Affairs [MECYS], 2003; Sargeant et al., 2010). FBE is based on mixed-age groupings where the curriculum is integrated and authentic assessments are used (Stone & Delfina, 2006). The ideas within FBE are heavily influenced by the multi-age and non-graded ideas of Dr. Sandra J Stone. For Stone, a multi-age classroom consists of students of different ages who will remain with the same teacher for several years. This forms the basis for non-graded education where students are grouped according to their academic levels and not their age (Gutiérrez & Slavin, 1992). Gutierrez and Slavin (1992) state that when nongraded systems are applied in elementary schools, it only applies from kindergarten to grade three. Although the aim of this brief document is not a critic of multi-age, nongraded education, I believe that a quick indication of the effectiveness of these ideas will aid in the overall discussion. A study done by Carbone (1961) found that “graded students exhibited higher achievement than the non-graded pupils” (p. 86). In addition, Mason and Burns (1996) “conclude that multigrade classes have at least a small negative effect on achievement as well as potentially negative effects on teacher motivation” (p. 307).

Theoretically, FBE uses the ideas of nongraded education to provide an “uninterrupted learning track” (Stone & Delfina, 2006, p. 336). Students are expected to progress through their learning journey from kindergarten to eighth grade (second form) uninterrupted. Stone and Delfina (2006) states that to achieve “uninterrupted development for all children throughout their school career, reformers (in the Netherlands Antilles) abolished the sixth-grade school-leaving examination” (p. 337). This is not the case as the FBE exit exams have been given every

year since 2012 with only a brief interruption in 2020 due to the COVID 19 pandemic. This presents a serious flaw in the concept of equitable education. Moreover, if the quality aspect of equitable education is applied, students at the end of the FBE cycle should have achieved basic levels of competencies to survive in the twenty-first-century society (OECD, 2012). Quality remains integral to the concept of equitable education.

Equitable education practices have real benefits for society. Small island states cannot afford to squander human capital in inefficient, non-inclusive, unfair education systems. Investing early in equitable education practices is economically advantageous (OECD, 2012). It reduces the dropout rate and therefore, reduces the number of adults that may be unemployed or may require welfare. Equitable education practices produce students with knowledge and expertise that can provide the ideas that produce economic growth. These well-educated, well-trained, well-rounded citizens can produce new ideas that can develop new industries (Gafar, 2001). In addition, they are less likely to participate in criminal behavior. These benefits can be realized when students are given the opportunity to go through school uninterrupted and are given the support needed to develop the relevant skills.

Preserving an exam at the end of the sixth grade means that the future of students is still determined by their performance on a standardized exam as early as eleven years old. Secondary schools with good teachers, curriculum, and learning environments generally require an average score of 70% or more in specific subject areas for admission. However, most elementary schools perform way below this standard. The overall performance at a national level from 2012 to 2018 ranged from 55% to 61% (Rollings, 2018) which means that the national average never came close that what is accepted by the more desirable secondary schools. In 2018, the best performing year, 73% of students scored 70% or more in English. However, only 31% and 23% were able to score 70% or more in Mathematics and General Knowledge respectively (Rollings, 2018). This means that in the best performing year 77% of students taking the exam could be denied entry into academic schools based on their performance in General Knowledge alone. Since most schools use a combination of scores for admission, this has real consequences for students.

Exam validity and reliability

A closer look at the FBE exam results gives rise to a few basic concepts of reliability and validity. If the exam is reliable and valid, then there must be an issue with elementary and secondary education. Elementary schools may not be teaching to the appropriate standards and/ or secondary school entrance standards are too high. Conversely, if elementary schools are teaching to acceptable standards, then there may be an issue with the exam's validity and reliability. However, exam validity and reliability; the quality of elementary education, and the appropriateness of secondary school entrance criteria are not exclusive concepts. Rather, there may be a complex interaction between all three that would need to be investigated to determine the reasons for low performance and the ability to meet secondary school entrance criteria. For example, it may be possible that students who underperform in the FBE exit exams are able to perform at comparable levels with students who passed the exam at the end of their secondary school careers. However, no data exists that examines this. A starting point, however, is to examine the concept of exam reliability and validity which I will do here.

The strong reliance on the FBE exit exam as the major factor in secondary school admission means that the exams are viewed as valid and reliable. Validity deals with how well the exam can be used to tell what the student knows while reliability deals with how consistently the scores are. When an exam is reliable, the results will not vary or only vary slightly from one use of the exam to another. This means that students taking the test at different times would receive the same score. While data could be found on the reliability of some exams through the Cronbach Alpha numbers published in some FBE reports, no information on the validity of the exams could be found. It is, however, possible for an exam to be *reliably invalid* if it consistently measures the wrong variables.

A pathway to equitable education practices

Education systems are complex bureaucratic structures. Therefore, change is difficult. Any change towards equitable practices must involve changes in beliefs and practices. Yet beliefs are the foundation for practice but changes in practice lead to changes in beliefs. This is the dilemma with educational change. Stakeholders in education can view the change as a threat or an opportunity (McGrath & Tschan, 2004). Therefore, their motivation towards the change will vary. In any case, the movement towards change involves a recognition of the difference between the current undesirable state and the future desirable state (Peterson, 1999). This involves establishing a sense of urgency, building a guiding coalition, and producing small wins that will sustain the change effort (Kotter, 1996). Successful change requires the reflection of all individuals involved as they gain an understanding of their situation and examine alternatives in order to select the most appropriate (Burnes, 2017). This means that any change towards equitable practices cannot be implemented through a top-down approach. Rather it can be directed by committed leaders who fully involve all those that will be responsible for implementing the change.

While these ideas represent a complex multidimensional approach that is likely to bring about change in a system that is resistant to change, an immediate starting point may be a method that is grounded in our current reality. It could be argued that the reason why a sixth-grade exam exists within an FBE system that explicitly speaks against this is that the education culture in St. Maarten is not yet ready for non-graded education. Beliefs need to be changed through changes in practices. Other Caribbean islands have already recognized this and implemented systems where student admission to secondary school is not based on a one-time standardized exam. In some islands, students are tested in both the fifth grade and sixth grade. In others, the entrance scores are determined by a combination of standardized testing, projects, and other school-based assessments. While these methods are not purely equitable, they provide a bridge between the traditional belief that students should be selected for secondary school and the more modern view of quality education for all.

Conclusion

There is little debate that the education system needs improvement. Improvements towards greater equity would provide the most benefits. However, changing towards equitable educational practices requires changes in deeply held practices and beliefs such as the use of examinations as a method of limiting access to quality education. Such changes in beliefs and practices must ultimately come from within as the ideas of the stakeholders in education are

incorporated into the greater vision. This will produce buy-in and provide the climate where practices can lead to changes in beliefs and vice versa. The implementation of FBE in St. Maarten provides an example of how a flawed implementation strategy can lead to the adoption of practices at the highest level that is antithetical to the prescribed educational philosophy.

To fully understand these issues, further study needs to be done to understand the perspectives of teachers in regard to educational equity and the curriculum. Longitudinal studies that can establish the real factors that contribute to student success in high school would be important in determining how to select students for high school. This will also provide vital information that will allow the education system to meet the needs of students who perform below predetermined quality standards at certain points in their educational journey. Assessments within education could, therefore, move from being punitive to being prescriptive. Only then will we be able to achieve true *education for all*.

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