



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES

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Part I Concerns as T&T Falls Below Average Reading Standards

By Dr. Pauslon Skerrit

Professor Harold Ramkissoon, a member of a Joint Select Committee (JSC), was said in a newspaper report to have projected that by the 2016 administration of the Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) assessment, Trinidad and Tobago would be above the international mean of 500. The PIRLS 2016 reading achievement assessment examined the reading comprehension skills of Standard 3 (Grade 4) students in Trinidad and Tobago and in 49 other participating countries. We did not make the projected gains in reading achievement. In the period 2006-2016, the reading achievement score rose by 43 points: from 436 points in 2006 to 471 in 2011 and with an increase of eight points on the scale to 479 in 2016, but this was not statistically significant. Having participated over the 15-year period from 2001 to 2016, we have moved upwards by more than 40 points, but we managed to remain below the international reading achievement mean of 500 points. This is certainly a matter for grievous concern given the many expensive reading achievement initiatives that have been put in place over the years.

There are some other disturbing trends in the data that resonate with the concerns expressed by many Trinidad and Tobago educators. From the perspective of reading achievement by gender, there is a statistically significant gap between the performance of boys and girls. Our girls outperformed the boys by 22 points. A positive turn in trend with girls' achievement over our boys is that we managed to reduce the gap by nine points over the last six years. While the achievement disparity was not unique to Trinidad and Tobago, this disproportion in performance placed us three points above the international mean of 19 points.

Another disturbing phenomenon that the data revealed is that only 80 per cent of our students are performing at the Low International Benchmark (400 points) which, by PIRLS standards, means we have managed to educate our students to a basic level of reading achievement. This stands in contrast to the international average among the 50 participating countries of 96 per cent of students achieving scores at the Low Benchmark. A mere four per cent of our Standard 3 readers performed at the Advanced Benchmark (625 points) in comparison with the more than 25 per cent of the students in grade 4 in Singapore and the Russian Federation.

Regarding the other two international benchmarks along the reading achievement scales, 22 per cent and 55 per cent of our students were able to achieve at the High (550 points) and Intermediate (475 points) levels of reading achievement. Much needs to be done to support

the literacy development of our nation's readers. The PIRLS 2016 assessment data needs to be carefully analyzed with attention paid to those schools which participated in the assessment. One initiative at The UWI School of Education is the proposal to establish a Psychoeducational Diagnostic and Intervention Unit that will provide support to the MoE for assessing and providing intervention to learners struggling with reading and other learning and behavioural challenges. This is an initiative with oversight by the esteemed Professor De Lisle, Dr. Korinne Louison (Clinical Psychology), Dr. Elna Carrington-Blaides (Special Education), Dr. Paulson Skerrit (Reading Specialist), other lecturers at the SoE in Psychology and Educational Psychology and a number of external advisors and consultants. The Masters in Reading Education is being reviewed to ensure that it aligns with the MoE's needs and that it provides participants with the reading pedagogical skills needed to achieve our literacy goals as a country. In consultation with the Dyslexia Association, a programme is also being developing as part of the SoE's Outreach Unit that will provide training for parents, teachers and members of the public in a sequential multi-sensory phonics program, and work is also ongoing on a project to provide reading instruction to young deaf and hard of hearing adults who exited our school system without achieving basic literacy skills. This project will take advantage of instruction provided in the native sign language of the participants, by trained and certified deaf teachers.

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(See Part II overleaf)

Part II

Highlights of MoE's PIRLS Initiatives

By Dr. Pauslon Skerrit

The projection toward gains in reading achievement by the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) reading achievement assessment by Professor Ramkissoon in 2013 were reasonable expectations, especially in the face of the many initiatives in education and literacy development adopted in T&T. The chapter on T&T in the 2016 edition of the PIRLS encyclopedia highlighted some of these injections into our education system. The chapter aimed to provide contextual factors that impact the development of reading skills, including the range of educational practice and resources at the school and home level. Here are a few highlights of the chapter on T&T that draw attention to the good intentions of the Ministry of Education. Of course, we read these with the understanding that the best of initiatives with the noblest of intentions are not always in sync with both fidelity to implementation guidelines and anticipated administrative support.

- The chapter noted that there has been an attempt to make greater use of the competencies our students develop in their most commonly spoken language, Trinidad and Tobago English Creole. Literacy coaches have been deployed in schools on academic watch from 2014 to 2016 and teachers benefit from the professional development they provide as they model evidenced-based reading instruction practices.
- While some initial reports since the release of the 2016 PIRLS assessment have challenged the role that well-stocked traditional libraries play in literacy development, our local public and school libraries have been very active in promoting literacy activities and ensuring access to a range of library resources.
- Those countries making gains at the High Benchmark were also the ones whose readers spent more years at early childhood education centres and in this area, the PIRLS encyclopedia chapter on Trinidad and Tobago explained that there is a drive in Trinidad and Tobago toward universal quality early childhood care programs.
- Our introduction of a thematic curriculum and advocacy for the use of culturally relevant reading materials, as well as read-alouds by teachers, have also been positive initiatives on the part of our Ministry of Education (MoE).
- The chapter also noted the teacher training initiatives at the teacher education institutions such as The UWI, The UTT, The USE and the MoE.
- It was reported that primary school curriculum devotes some 15-20 per cent of its teaching time to the development of the five main sub-skills of reading: phonological awareness and phonics, word recognition, fluency, vocabulary development and reading comprehension. Countries like England, which paid attention to the phonics skills of their readers, excelled in their reading achievement scores. It is a credit to the

MoE of Trinidad and Tobago that- according to the PIRLS chapter on Trinidad and Tobago - in 2013 they launched the Leading for Literacy project which provided training for teachers, principals and parents in a synthetic phonics program.

- While we are making strides in the use of technology to support reading instruction, what we make accessible to teachers and students is still woefully inadequate due to system limitations, accountability, availability of equipment in the schools and reliable internet access.
- The Student Support Services Division has also been doing much to assess and provide support for students challenged with learning, but the chapter noted that little attention is being paid to our higher achieving students.

As the chapter on Trinidad and Tobago in the PIRLS 2016 encyclopedia indicated, the MoE is looking to the institutions at the tertiary level to make their contribution toward our achieving the goal of significantly higher percentages of our students reading complex text for literary experiences and to acquire and use information across the four broad processes of information. While the chapter on Trinidad and Tobago in PIRLS indicated that the MOE has adopted a number of noteworthy interventions, the limitations within the system at various levels and the challenges with consistency in implementation may have worked against the kind of impact envisaged. A follow up to this article use the opportunity to examine what really matters for our Trinbagonian struggling readers, what research-based programs in our schools should look like and the achievable pathway critically needed “system wide coherent reform” (Fullan & Quinn, 2010).

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