

Why Study Education in the Americas:
A case study of a Belizean school system

Brenda H. Hargrove

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Brenda Hanks Hargrove is a current doctoral student in Educational Leadership at East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina. She is working on her dissertation topic, The Under-representation of African American males in Academically Gifted programs. In addition, she has completed 18 credit hours in English for a minor course of study in Multicultural Studies. Her research interests are the African Diaspora, achievement gaps, and multicultural studies.

Abstract

This paper explores the benefits and advantages of studying education in other countries, sisters to the United States, such as in the small Central American country of Belize. This case study describes the everyday life of two contrasting schools in Belize, a private school and a public school. Modern day school issues affecting the lives of students and families are discussed. In addition, short interviews are conducted with former students of the Belizean school system between the ages of 17 and 26 and explore the changing face of education in Belize. Comparisons and contrasts to United States educational issues are explored. High stakes testing, parental involvement and social issues affecting education are highlighted.

The history of education in Latin America, the Caribbean and other developing countries focuses on the influence or role of education in effecting the political and social climates of a country during a particular historical period. Education has been viewed as a means to elevate the social, cultural and political awareness of its people. In some cases, such as in Mexico, Argentina and Cuba, education has been utilized as a tool to indoctrinate political philosophies into young minds (Vaughn, 1992; Greenup & Greenup, 1947; Roucek, 1964). In other instances, education in the university and cultural setting has prompted social and political change (Healy, 1991; Mabry, 1982; Maseman, 2003; Arnove, Francis, Mollis, & Torres, 2003). Popular education programs,

developed by Freire, enabled individuals to formulate their own path of learning. The connection between culture and curriculum can be found in all observed printed, electronic information and behavior of the educational setting (Maseman, 1982). The significance of the study of education in a global context in a small Central American country will be examined in this paper.

According to Arnove, et.al. (2003), “education can be used to legitimate a political system. It also can serve to interrogate it. Although an education system may function to perpetuate the social division of labor, it can equip individuals with the skills and knowledge to humanize the workplace and change the class structure of a society.” (p.314). Class, culture, and education are linked in a society by economics (Maseman, 1982). Most countries in the Americas are dependent states and their economic systems are not conducive to redistributing wealth to the subordinate classes. Public educational resources are also unevenly distributed. Education enrollment fluctuates.

Several factors contribute to the continuing disparities in most developing countries in Latin and Central America— ethnicity, gender, and region. Indigenous and minority populations are the most discriminated in regard to access to educational opportunity. Region and the dominant language are barriers. Disparities in urban and rural areas are found in illiteracy rates, the number of schools, the physical condition of schools, and in the lack of educational materials and textbooks. There are only four countries in South and Central America with a majority of students attending secondary schools. Secondary schools—grades 7 through 9---are an integral part of compulsory schooling. It is described as vocationally oriented, encompassing technical, commercial and teacher training. Secondary schools are concentrated in the cities.

Higher education growth, however, is faster than any region in the world. Females have comparable enrollment rates to other “developed” countries around the world. Still high rates of illiteracy among poor, rural, indigenous women abound. The strongest variable with impact on income inequality is education. (Arnove, et.al., 2003). Ethnographical studies of education in every country and setting can bear witness to the rich modes of cultural transference and the great variety of experiences that can be called “educational” (Maseman, 1982).

Globalization is defined as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring miles away and vice versa”. (Arnove & Torres, 2003). All forms of technological innovations through the media and computers have brought the world to every world citizen’s doorstep. There is a greater quest for international understanding and peace, but also a competitiveness that drives research efforts. The belief that there is a causal relationship between the “excellence” of a school system; as measured by national standardized exams, and economic success of a country in global competition has revived interest in the relationship between educational systems and national productivity. Due to continuing world changes in Eastern and Central Europe and Asia, interest in the language of governments and instruction has intensified. English has become the international language of communication (Arnove & Torres, 2003).

Comparative and international studies when utilized effectively can serve to enrich the knowledge base of the education field as a whole. The benefits of such research studies are numerous. Comparative education is a multidisciplinary field driven by the fundamental belief that education can be improved and that it can serve as a

change agent for the betterment of all nations. (Arnove & Torres, 2003). Moreover, Chabbott & Elliott (2003) described four benefits of educational studies:

1. They define what is achievable.
2. They help policy makers and researchers to observe and characterize consequences of different practices and policies for different groups and in different contexts.
3. They bring to light concepts for understanding education that may have been overlooked in the United States;
4. They help to identify and question beliefs and assumptions that are taken for granted.

Small studies—individualized case studies—have fewer implications for policy; but are beneficial in understanding and broadening the field of knowledge. Studies focusing on specific policies, such as school vouchers, high school tracking and the Singapore math curriculum, and their implementation have had some impact on educational practices in the United States. Results of large-scale studies, such as TIMSS (math and science focus), sponsored by governments are most widely distributed and gain the most attention during times of “crises”. Funding cycles are not synchronized—the political world (one year or less); the current cycle between international educational assessments (three or four years); peer reviewed research findings (five to ten years); the cycle of education reform (decades) (Chabbott & Elliott, 2003).

The Committee on a Framework and Long-term Research Agenda for International Comparative Education Studies headed by Chabbott & Elliott (2003)

provides several recommendations for a more balanced research approach: 1. The United States should invest in research focusing on educational experiences of other countries to provide a broader context for US experiences and innovations. 2. The costs of large scale and smaller studies should be assessed. 3. Multi-component research studies over extended time periods should be encouraged. Five paths suggested by the Committee through which educational research may impact educational systems are: educational materials; pre-and in-service training; education policies; changed public perspectives; and the domestic research community. Technology has enabled greater access to educational materials, curricula and staff development.

To have the greatest impact on policy, tied to crises versus strong performance, comparative studies should draw on all types of studies, all scholarship and ideas, that contribute to the understanding of school-society relations; schooling and culture; religion and schooling; and the home and school (Chabbott & Elliott, 2003; Arnove & Torres, 2003).

Arnove & Torres (2003) stressed the three dimensional aspects of comparative study: scientific, based on building theory; improving policy and practice at home; and contributing to global understanding and world peace. The continued study of the educational systems of the Americas and its multifaceted implications and influence in other parts of the world should be noted. The history of the educational systems in Latin America, as well as, all nations has had a tremendous impact on the course of educational, political, and social systems around the world. “There is a continuing need for more qualitative and historical work that ... is subject to different canons of systematic inquiry and different warrants for generalization than are large scale surveys.”

(Chabbott & Elliott, 2003, p. 28). The consolidation of knowledge from different types of studies will continue to be more effective and have a greater impact on educational systems.

This paper now focuses on a case study conducted in the school system of Belize.

The small country of Belize, a Central American country, nestled on the shores of the Caribbean Sea, has not been included in any major discussion of education in the Americas. The country is bordered by Mexico and Guatemala. Though gaining its independence from the British in 1981, the population is definitely bilingual— English-speaking, Spanish-speaking, and Creole. The research conducted in the introduction of this paper makes no mention of Belize in its discussion of the concerns of developing countries in the Americas or in the significance of studying education from a global perspective. Unlike its neighbors, Guatemala and Mexico, Belize has a literacy rate of 93% (UNICEF, 2003).

The Belizean school system is progressing, but the traditional basis of the educational system is British. As a British colony, Belize's early schools were established and run by the church, Roman Catholic and Jesuits. Missionaries from England and the United States taught traditional European and North American values. The primary focus was literacy of the "masses", but also maintaining a separation of the classes. Only the upper classes and economically advantaged were allowed to attend secondary schools and higher education and given the Cambridge examinations (Lewis, 2000). Today, Belize continues to operate church schools, funded by the government and private schools. Many students and families seek higher education in the United States and Europe.

As a former teacher of the Spanish language in elementary school, there was no knowledge of Belize as having a Spanish speaking population. However, Belize is a country of diversity, tradition and history that has a great deal to offer and contribute in the discussion of international and cultural understanding. This writer lived and studied in Belize City for three weeks at the University of Belize—a time to study Multicultural Literature; the daily lives of multicultural families; and an opportunity to compare the Belizean schools with the public school system of the writer, a public school administrator. This is a brief description of observations and interviews with members of the Belizean school system.

Uniforms—green and white; brown and white; pink and white; burgundy and white; navy blue and white; striped shirts, jumpers and khaki pants. The uniforms catch the eye first as the students walk along the streets; scurrying about for lunch, or waiting to catch the local city bus home. The students, young and older, maneuver their way around the traffic, street vendors, and bicycles, with ease and confidence. The various uniform colors represent the church schools, or private schools, which the students attend. Primary school and high school alike wear the uniforms.

It is June, 2005 and the schools of Belize City are still in session. The last day of school is June 24th. Belize Elementary School, a private school, is full of activity on this particular day. The vice principal of the “Home of the Jaguars” has just received the results of the Primary School Exam (PSE) for the Standard VI (8th grade) students. As she calls the students to the gym/auditorium, the observer visits a first grade classroom. Mrs. Peters* has little time to talk or entertain a visitor, even from the U. S.

The first grade classroom has 31 little “busy” people, their veteran teacher and a teacher assistant. The classroom is crowded, even with the desks pushed together in groups. Student work is displayed along with posters of letters, sounds and blends. The agenda for the day is posted on the board. The teacher rings a bell for attention and the students listen and began their assignment, the letter, “R”. They answer correctly in unison to the teacher. Of course, the students fill the visitor in on what’s going on in the classroom. M was hit by another student and has a scar; two others have won the Spelling Bee, 1st and 2nd place. The students are talkative, but manage to complete their assignment –drawing two pictures of things that rhyme. Soft music plays in the background. The teacher circulates and prompts students, then checks their work. The teacher assistant checks the other assignment. They are proud to show the visitor, “E” for excellent. Asian, Creole, Belizean, a blend of diversity in the classroom.

The observer begins a self-guided tour around the school while waiting for Mrs. Peters. The white school building has two sections—Infant I & II, and lower grades in one building and the older students on the other side of a courtyard. The gymnasium, auditorium, media center, and computer lab are in a separate building. The offices of the principal and assistant principal are on opposite sides of the archway opening to the school. A security guard greets visitors at the wrought iron gate at the street.

Students are excited and upset about their tests results. Some are walking around crying, not wanting their parents to be disappointed in their performance. Mrs. Peters and the teachers encourage them to call their parents; and assure them that they are proud. Unexpectedly, the Channel 7 News crew arrives with “official” results of school and

student rankings for the country. Twelve out of 25 of the top students are attending Belize Elementary. The excitement and pride are evident from everyone! The news crew is there to interview the top two students in the country! Both Asian female students rank number one and two. Oh well, no more studies for the day!

After school, Mrs. Peters finally has a chance to sit and talk with a visitor, a fellow educator and colleague. Mrs. Peters is a graduate of the University of North Florida for school administration; however, she has been a teacher at Belize Elementary for ten years and the vice principal for two years. Her background is Special Education. Mrs. Peters' philosophy of education is that "every child is educable. Every single child can learn something. It's up to us to teach them to the best of their abilities. Education is thought of as a square that all students must fit in, but some students are triangles. They are different."

In describing her "typical" day, Mrs. Peters emphasizes her role in monitoring the curriculum of the school. One of her duties, as well as the principal, is to check lesson plans and grades of students. Mrs. Peters holds conferences with teachers if the administrators feel that a particular concept has not been covered appropriately. They offer suggestions for improvement. Another important duty is discipline of students and communication with parents. Students accumulate demerits and are given consequences accordingly. Students are suspended from school if necessary.

Mrs. Peters credits the teachers and the curriculum for the current success of the school and students. The basic subjects of math, language arts—English, spelling, reading and phonics--, social studies and science are emphasized. In addition, religion, Spanish, and computer science are offered. Students also have classes in art, physical

education, music and media time. DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) is also scheduled in the morning routine. The students are involved in extracurricular activities as well, such as The Coca Cola National Spelling Bee (an Upper Division 1st Place trophy for 2005 was displayed); Festival of the Arts, and national poster contests.

One concern is that there are no set programs for special education or advanced or gifted students. Advanced students receive differentiated instruction in the regular classroom. Teachers seek the assistance of the assistant principal and other resources to provide support for students with disabilities. There are limited services in the country for special education; only one school in Belize City.

Three final questions were asked of Mrs. Peters---what are her greatest challenges?

What are three most important issues in education? And how does the school cope with such a diverse faculty and students? Mrs. Peters offered these observations:

Greatest challenges: “addressing parent concerns”; “parents—they do not like it when their child is disciplined; a few question everything you do.”

Important issues: “Schools do not have enough resources; we are the exception; we have textbooks for all students. There is not enough space in the schools to accommodate students. They are overcrowded. Some schools have 45 students in a class (the poorer, church schools). The government curriculum is good, but there are not enough resources to back it up. We need more special education resources; only 3 or 4 people working at the Special Education Center. Some parents send their students with disabilities out of the country, if they have the money.”

Diversity: “Belize is so mixed. It is not important. We embrace it. Our theme for Open House was ethnicity. We make everybody feel as if their culture is good!”

Belize Elementary School is a private school of 415 students in grades kindergarten through eighth grade. The tuition is 185 Belizean dollars (approx. \$92.50) per month. The school does not receive government funds, but operates on student tuition, fundraising, and parent support. Mrs. Peters states that her job as an administrator is stressful, but she is also a Language Arts teacher in the 8th grade. Her time is divided between the two! Hats off for a job well done! Coincidentally, the observer was seen on Belizean TV, in the background when the students were being interviewed! The uniforms are navy blue and white—“official” colors of the students and staff! The staff is described as “highly professional”.

The Holy Redeemer Primary School was founded in 1869; a Catholic church-school. The principal is Mrs. Sampson, a veteran teacher and administrator of the 1158 student school. The brown and yellow buildings are arranged in a square, two courtyards in the middle of the sections. The two story buildings house the lower grades and another building—the upper level students, grades 6—8. A seventh grade class was observed on this day, June 13th. The last weeks of school are hectic with final plans for graduation and more excited children to contain!

The teacher circulates and checks work in the classroom while students complete their assignment or read a “Happy to be Drug Free” booklet. The teacher reminds students to re-check their work and not make careless errors. The classroom is hot at 2:00pm—no fan or air conditioning, but everyone seems comfortable and anxious for break. The student desks crowd the classroom, even though they are arranged in neat

rows. The twenty-six students are in uniform, burgundy and white. The bulletin boards remind of reading skills and honor religious leaders. Character posters, Spanish vocabulary words and classroom duty rosters decorate the walls.

At break time, the students disperse to the courtyard to socialize, have a snack or play. The 6th through 8th graders (Standard IV, V and VI) are together, while the other courtyard is full of playing, running Infant ---Standard III students (k-5). When the teacher rings the bell, students return to their classrooms and settle in, reciting their prayers in unison.

Mrs. Sampson graciously interrupts her day to spend time with a visitor. She describes the curriculum of the church-school system (the teachers are paid by the state, but the schools are operated by the church). The students are taught math, language arts, social studies, science, computer skills and Spanish. There is limited manpower to operate the media center, but outside agencies provide “expressive arts” such as music, karate, ballet, and arts & crafts. The classroom teachers conduct physical education classes for their individual classes. (Duty schedules, such as for the bathroom, are posted in the lounges for teachers). The students are involved in Sports Day, the Annual Spelling Bee, and various religious contests. The 8th graders rank in the 50th percentile on the PSE. The grading system ranges from 80-100 (A); 70-79 (B); 60-69 (C); and 50-59 (D). The school day is extended to 3:30pm.

Mrs. Sampson’s philosophy of education is “to mold the entire child and prepare them for life, not just the exam. Students are talented in different areas.” Mrs. Sampson, with her training and experience was selected as principal, even though she could have

retired. She has put in place transition procedures for students in the various levels. The school has been unified under one principal, with three assistant principals to support. Mrs. Sampson spends most of her time, dealing with parent concerns and “social issues”, home problems, of students. Major discipline problems include disrespect to teachers and fighting. However, students are not suspended but given chores around the school. There is no special education or gifted programs at Holy Redeemer, but teachers are encouraged to take private courses to recognize problems.

Mrs. Sampson, along with the assistant principals, check teacher lesson plans every Monday. The plans are detailed including sections for objectives, evaluation, and linkages to real life. Mrs. Sampson cites these three critical issues affecting education today:

1. Students lack study skills; too much TV; no monitoring
2. Parents are young; they don't understand their role and the importance of their involvement.
3. The lack of resources—many schools do not have the resources they need; we have supportive parents.

Mrs. Sampson's greatest challenge is getting children reading and writing properly. Workshops for teachers are provided during the summer months by professors from abroad. Mrs. H has this to say about diversity: “We are used to diverse groups naturally; the children are also. It presents good examples for teachers in their teaching. (Lesson plans were observed with notes about mestizos and Belizean history). Mayan, Garifuna, Mestizo, Creole—diversity is natural for Belize.

The visit ended, but the memories remain. A little student recognized the visitor from the pool and remembered her name. The assistant principal could have easily been a cousin from the states. Further, confirming the belief, that all are connected around the world. The African Diaspora is evidenced throughout the globe, from the faces of the people to the images of Olmec gods.

Another inquiry of this study was to gain perspective from Belizean males concerning the school system. Four Belizean males between the ages of 17 and 26 were asked the following questions: 1. how would you describe your schooling? 2. How has it changed? 3. Do you feel your education had prepared you for what you are doing now? 4. How did your school deal with diversity? 5. Who has had the greatest influence on you concerning your schooling?

P. J. (names changed for the purpose of this paper) is a 26 year old math teacher. He has been a teacher for 5 years, teaching in elementary school and the University of Belize. He grew up in the Corozal District and attended a Catholic primary school. He recalls that the basics were taught at his school—mathematics, science, English and social studies. Spanish was learned in the community. Math was a favorite subject. He did well in school, so it was not hard to adjust. However, “transition from primary to high school is different. Diversity wasn’t a problem. It was noticed but did not hold you back. All students socialized together”.

“No one person influenced me, maybe my mother. She told me to “do my own thing; you have to stand alone. She taught me a lot of independence.”

P. J. plans to continue his studies and study actuarial sciences (statistics) in a Masters program in England. He describes his teaching style: “I encourage individual

discretion and common sense. I encourage my students not to assume, but look at the whole picture.”

The youngest young male, 17 years old, had a most general view of his education as “fun”---“it was an experience, friends and memories.” Raul has attended five schools in his limited school years. He was “looking for the right school”. He recalls that Belize Elementary was his “best” one because he “made a lot of friends”. His favorite subject was English, literature and science. “Interesting books can capture your imagination”.

Raul feels that the education he received did prepare him for what he is doing now—studying to be a tourist guide. “I took history, social studies, mathematics, and English; Spanish, literature, science and P. E.; both Belizean and world history”. He is currently studying at St. John’s College, a tradition for his father, and his mother’s brothers. St. John’s, Raul informs, is the only Jesuit school; considered one of the highest standards. He is taking history, social studies and ecology, to learn about the environment.

Raul credits his mom and cousins as being his greatest influences because “I look up to them. They are admirable; they have made it and I want to also.” Raul completed Standard VI at Belize Elementary school and scored 85 on the PSE. Raul states he had problems in school because he did not get along with the teachers; however, he did have an excellent teacher; a “professional” teacher. Raul’s mom interjects that most of the church-school teachers have “no professionalism. They take everything personal, then your child suffers from that”. Raul explained that “my teachers did not like me because I speak my mind. If you do something, I’ll tell you. My teachers sucked!”

Raul describes himself as “an outgoing person”. “I have a lot of energy; I’m people friendly”. He is studying tourism because “it’s my passion, something I love”. Raul’s parents are tour guides and members of the tourism board of Belize. Raul succinctly states, “There is no discrimination here in Belize”.

The two other respondents also had problems with their teachers in the primary schools. Tomas’, age 24, attended the Holy Redeemer Primary School as a youth. He states that “students were not given a chance to voice their own opinion. It was mostly rote learning; no opportunities to question. The students were divided into homogeneous groups, A, B, C, etc. There was no interaction between the students. The school is religion based, Catholic, so students were encouraged to go to church. Prayers were said. Religion, reading comprehension, math, English, social studies, spelling, phonics, geography and science were taught until 8th grade. Corporal punishment was used.”

Tomas’ observes that “when I look back now, the interaction between the students and teacher was limited. We used to have three different principals; now they have just one. Students are not divided anymore. Belizean history is taught.” Concerning diversity, “all classes were diverse. Like any school, students would mock you. The teacher was sometimes the source. The poorer, Black people were in the lower classes”.

Tomas’ feels that he did obtain the “basics—mostly comprehension skills, math and science; a good foundation in many ways. However, the teachers literally believed they were God, the old philosophy. It affected me in high school. I broke out of my mold. They saw it as rebellious. Demerits were given, depending on the teacher.”

Tomas is currently a student in the Masters program at East Carolina University, USA.

“My parents [have been the greatest influence] because my father grew up poor. He was raised by a single mother. He went to grade school and had to work. He was punished for missing classes. He didn’t go pass Standard III (5th grade). He learned from the streets; the hardest jobs. He is currently a plumber. He made it on his own. His goal was to provide us with an education, the four of us. He helped us financially. He raised us to work and appreciate the value of something.”

Miguel, also age 26, describes a similar school, St. Ignacius Primary School, Roman Catholic, in Belize City. He remembers studying English, math, social studies, science, reading, and religion. Spanish was taught in the 8th grade. Miguel describes himself as “an outcast. I was in the top class, (classes divided A, B, C, D). I questioned a lot, especially in religion and the motives of authority. They thought I was a trouble maker. Teachers did not allow you to question. Teachers were ‘all knowing’. They knew the subject matter, but they took it personal” (if you questioned them). “They are trying to respect students more now. They are less authoritative. It is more student centered; authority without dehumanizing.”

Miguel acknowledges that his primary school prepared him for high school—“the academics and regulations; social and academics.” Miguel is currently a graduate student at the University. Miguel is Garifuna and makes this observation concerning diversity in the schools: “There was nothing overt. It was more to do with class. Garifuna, Creole, Spanish, we were treated the same way. It was not noticeable in the classroom. However, the levels in the classes did make a hell of a difference. Most of my friends were in level C and D. They were treated as if they were not smart. My friend was tracked since she associated with the lower groups”.

Miguel summarizes his greatest influence: “My mother because my mother did not go beyond 8th grade. She grew up in the 60s. Her learning has been inter- and intrapersonal. There have been instances where she realizes a higher degree would have given her some clout. The “paper” would account for a lot. She encourages me the most.”

The young men’s experiences are different; but similar. The private school and church-school systems of Belize are similar. Religion is a part of the daily routine and direct instruction is valued by the teachers. Students are allowed to question and explore ideas on their own as they grow older. The current teacher described his teaching style, as application, allowing students to use critical thinking skills and apply the ideas to different situations. Emphasis is placed on obtaining the basic skills, but also allows students creative outlets through extra-curricular and enrichment activities. Technology is an important part of the school systems’ curriculum.

Homogeneous grouping is also changing in the schools; however, testing is a huge priority, and gains media attention. The Primary School Examination determines what types of opportunities for secondary education the students will achieve. The faculty and staff are as hard working and dedicated as those all around the globe. The issues of testing accountability, limited resources, discipline, and parent concerns are universal for administrators. The influence of parents and the continued need for parent involvement and support of the schools is also emphasized.

The diversity of Belize allows the people to view the world from a different perspective. Nothing is ever just black and white. There is a pride in the history and diversity of the people that is expressed by young and old. The uniform colors---

burgundy and white, brown and white, white and green, blue and white—caught this writer's attention. The diverse colors and pride in the wearing of uniforms represent the true nature of diversity and history in Belize. There is a love of their country and themselves, whether African, British, Creole, Mayan, Asian, Mestizo, Mennonite, or Latino.

Education has become an important avenue for change and progress in Belize. The Belizean school systems' emphasis on literacy and religion continue to impact the curriculum and practices in the classrooms of Belize. Even though influences of the British colony remain, Belize is striving for its own identity and regaining and utilizing its resources for itself (Lewis, 2000). Direct instruction is emphasized with a great deal of teacher directed activities. However, the variety of extra-curricular activities and the extended school day allows for differentiation for the students.

Note: This qualitative work is intended to contribute to the limited knowledge base of educational practices and culture of Belize; thereby, enriching the education field and global perspective of educators everywhere.

*For the purposes of this paper, names have been changed.

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