



Explaining Trinidad and Tobago's system response to international assessment data

Trinidad and Tobago's system response

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Received 20 March 2013

Revised 16 August 2013

18 November 2013

Accepted 28 November 2013

Abstract

Purpose – Although high-quality comparative data from international assessments are now more widely available, to what extent is that data being used to trigger, inform, and direct educational change in non-Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) countries? The purpose of this paper is to develop a theoretical framework to guide a case analysis of Trinidad and Tobago's system response to international assessment data.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a single-nation explanatory case study using data from policy documents and elite interviews. Findings are generated through inductive thematic analysis.

Findings – The four emerging themes were: first, weaknesses in the national evaluation system; second, policy-making practices not attuned to data; third, lack of collaboration and stakeholder involvement; and fourth, challenges in accessing and using data. Findings suggested that data rarely acted alone to trigger system change. Critical to initiating and sustaining effective data use for system reform were policy-making contexts and mental maps of system leaders, which in this context acted as barriers. Respondents believed that greater strategic leadership from politicians and technocrats could ensure data-informed systemic change.

Research limitations/implications – The study focuses upon data use and data-driven decision making for whole system reform within a single country context. However, it advances theory that might be applied to other non-OECD cases.

Originality/value – The findings contribute to the refinement of a conceptual model explaining data-driven system reform applicable to non-OECD contexts. The role of system leaders when using international assessment data is clarified.

Keywords Strategic leadership, International assessments, Effective data use, Evidence-based policy making, System reform, Data-driven decision making in education

Paper type Research paper

Whole system reform as context

Over the last decade, there has been increased focus on whole system reform in nation states (Hopkins *et al.*, 2011; Fullan, 2009, 2010, 2011; Levin, 2007, 2008; Schiefelbein, 1995). Whole system reform involves improving several schools at the same time within an administrative region or nation state (Datnow *et al.*, 2006). Targets for change might be created from benchmarking successful school systems (Clifton, 2011). This comparison of schools and systems across contexts has facilitated the transfer of

The authors would like to thank all of the stakeholders who took the time to respond to our interview questions and engage us in extended discussion. Special acknowledgment to the late Carol Keller, Chair of the National Task Force on Education 1993-2003 and the Vision 2020 pre-primary, primary, and secondary education subcommittee, who passed away during the formulation of this paper.



Later stages of the change process (moving and finishing) were frequently impeded by limited system capacity for taking action. The multiple structural and administrative impediments included lack of collaboration between units, political gamesmanship, and the current absence of strategic leadership. These components might be regarded as an aspect of system capacity. This lack of capacity was also closely connected to the reactive and exclusionary policy-making culture. Therefore, one useful revision to the proposed model might be to consider the institutional, political, and societal milieu as an all-embracing factor, exerting a critical influence on each stage in the model. Additional evidence will be needed from other non-OECD contexts to corroborate and further refine the theoretical propositions presented in this paper.

In this study, key informants believed that stakeholders were generally unsure about the purpose and role of international assessment data primarily because of lack of visioning and marketing by the system leadership. It was strongly believed that such data informed, strategic leadership by politicians and technocrats was needed to help stakeholders connect data with purposes and vision. In turn, solid connections between people, data and purpose would foster collaborative action (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004). Interviewees pointed to a positive demonstration of local strategic leadership after the 1991 IEA study by the then co-ordinator of reading. In Trinidad and Tobago, strategic leadership focused on people, context, and procedures will: first, build commitment and motivation to using data in system reform; and second, work towards improving structures and processes for generating, using, and disseminating data (Davies and Davies, 2005; Segone, 2009; Sutcliffe and Court, 2005). Arguably, such system-level strategic leadership might also prove catalytic in a highly centralized education system (Hallinger, 1998).

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