Striving to Get a lot Out of a Little: Enhancing Belize’s Educational System

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the environmental impacts of the educational system in Belize and to find ways to improve the system as a whole. Beginning in 1816, Belize’s educational system was born out of a small group of poor children who worked as slaves. At the time, these schools were funded by donations from the public as well as some local funds. Overtime, Belize has made some advancements to their educational system such as incorporating government involvement, development of teacher training, and passing legislation that benefits individuals who want to receive an education. Studies show that Belize spends the most money on their education when compared to similar countries like Cuba, Barbados, and Costa Rica (“Improving Access,” 2012). Unfortunately, this high spending has not been able to sustain increasing or successful outcomes for the education of Belizean youth. Children not achieving satisfactory performance levels, lack of teacher training, and rising costs of resources are all issues that affect the school environment. Data on this topic has been collected through observation and interviews of local community members in Belize, scholarly and peer reviewed research articles, and theories from the text An Invitation to Environmental Sociology. Through interviewing locals and observing Belize’s environment, the findings of this study suggest that Belizeans are content with their lifestyle, even if they do not have similar opportunities to the American educational system. This paper recommends the acknowledgment of Belizean perspectives and how their education paves the way for their future occupations.

Background

Education is an essential quality for individual success, but learning is acquired differently throughout the world. Before 1973, Belize was known as British Honduras, and this Mayan civilization practiced various British principles (Lewis, 2000). One decade later, Belize
gained its independence from Great Britain, but their education system remained as a British colonial model. This framework refused to educate ethnic minorities and slaves, which made it impossible for these individuals to further access secondary education (Lewis, 2000). According to Jane Bennett, “the system is outdated and structurally flawed, set on a colonial frame that no longer exists in the region, one that operates to produce only a few elite students…”, which emphasizes the unfair nature of their educational opportunities (Bennett, 2013). This ruling has majorly influenced Belize’s educational system today, which is why this environment has not been able to advance.

The first school that was founded in Belize was discovered by the Church of England, and it was financially assisted by donations from the public (Lewis, 2000). This relationship created a conflicting system between the church and the state. Because multiple parts of the environment are connected, someone is always “living downstream” (Bell & Ashwood, 2016). This means that choices are often made without factoring who it will affect down the road. The battle between the church and the state led to the neglect of a successful education plan in the colony which has continued to affect students today. Although the education system is highly underdeveloped in comparison to other countries, local Belizeans are proud of their current lifestyles. This research supports the purpose of understanding Belizean perspectives and how their education system can be improved.

Methodology

In order to get a broader context of how Belize’s education system has performed over time, interviews were conducted with two Belizean community members through Duquesne University’s Spring Breakaway study abroad trip. Participant X is an adult man who gave his perspective on Belize’s education system based off of his previous schooling experience. This candidate was chosen because he attended a junior college in order to further his career as a tour
guide for the organization Programme for Belize. Participant Y is an adult woman who has two children currently in school. Participant Y has one child in primary school, and her other child attends high school. This participant was chosen to give information about the current education system in Belize and how effective it is for both of her children. Each of the individuals were interviewed using a list of questions created from the research found in the paper. These interviews were conducted at different times so that the participant’s answers were not influenced by other sources.

Discussion

Belize has experienced many issues regarding their education system, and one of them is trying to enhance it. Many of the issues are a result of the lack of money that is available to be put towards the education system, families that live in poverty, and education not being the top priority for youth as it is in other countries. One of the main issues is the lack of resources and funding that the schools have access to. Schools in Belize receive very little funding from the government, which has resulted in a very minimal number of resources for teachers and students to utilize. Belize currently is in unsustainable foreign debt that prohibits the government to provide schools with the resources needed in order to make large and lasting improvements in their education system.

Unlike in the United States, Belizeans do not have access to a free public education. It is required by law for all students to attend primary school from the age of six to fourteen, however each student must pay. According to Participant Y, “students pay around one dollar per week to attend school during the primary school years.” This payment goes towards supplies and resources that are used throughout the school year. Over time, this adds up to roughly one thousand six hundred dollars per child to attend school. This is a costly price for families who are not financially stable, and it may be even more difficult to provide this cost if parents have
multiple children. If the schools received more funding from the government, then the fee that is required would likely be dropped and students would be able to attend primary school for free or at a lesser cost.

Lacking finances within Belizean families is one of the largest factors that prohibits students from continuing their education along with the reason that working is prioritized over education (Connelly, 2001). Participant Y shared, “in order to attend high school each student must pay seven hundred and fifty dollars per year and are also required to buy their own textbooks. The high costs that are required for students within this country to further their education lead students to either drop out or go into the workforce. Roughly thirty to forty percent of Belizeans and their families live in poverty (Bourne, 2009). Because of the high poverty rate, many families cannot afford to send their child to receive higher forms of education. The only option that is then left is to pursue a trade and enter into the workforce. Education is not held in high regards, and it is often more encouraged for children to enter into the workforce.

Conclusion

After conducting our research, we have concluded some strategies and techniques to further advance Belize’s education system. Following the two interviews, we were able to review the school system as a whole. Participant X and Participant Y both recalled their journey and their children's current steps through the system as positive despite the cost. Although major financial investments from Belize’s government should be implemented to support the education of their youth, Belizeans have a different perspective on their education and how successful it is. Participant X reported that his school experience prepared him for college and ultimately gave him an opportunity to apply for a job. Similarly, Participant Y expressed that her daughters were currently receiving a sufficient education. From the perspectives of our interview participants
they found little frustration in the school system in Belize, but their experience cannot account for the entire population in the country of varying circumstances and numerous low socio-economic groups. Along with the data collected from the interviews, we have researched organizations that are working toward advancing the education system of Belize. A huge contributing organization in advancing the system is UNICEF Belize. The organization recognizes that at risk families typically require some support to help properly nurture their children (UNICEF, 2020). UNICEF ultimately enables Belizeans to acquire necessary skills, opportunities, and success by partnering with the government (UNICEF, 2020). It is pertinent for larger non-profit organizations to assist underdeveloped countries. These organizations will help break the negative feedback loop that Belize has been stuck in for decades. Overall, the research found in the sources as well as both interviews show that Belize’s education system is underdeveloped. It is important to note that Belizeans enjoy their lifestyle, even if they do not have as many opportunities as other developed countries.
References


