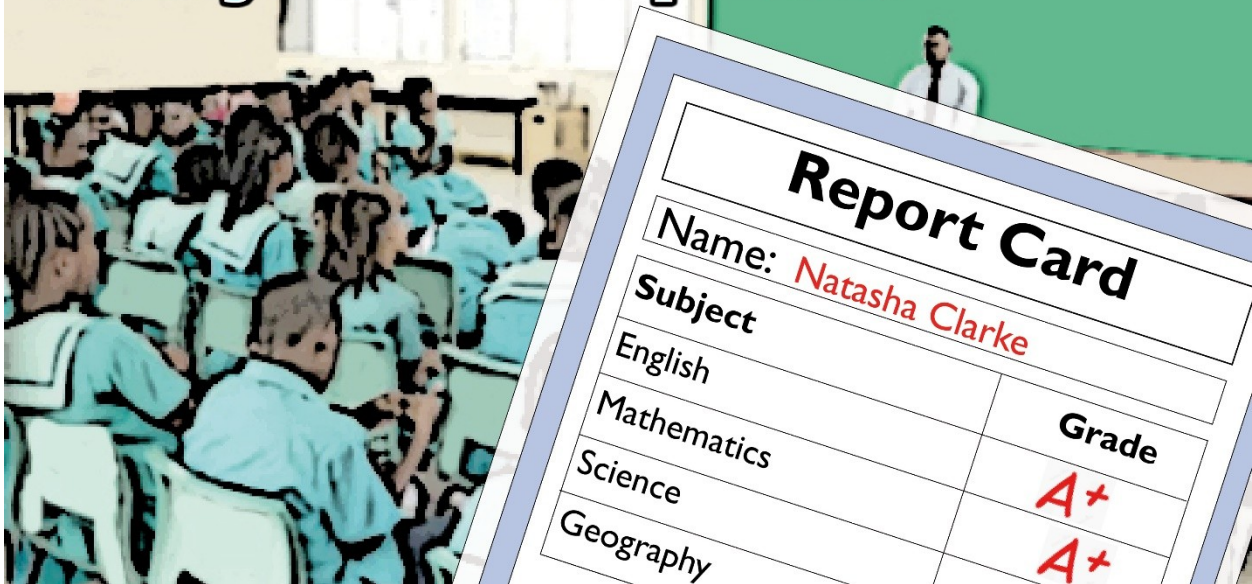


Mastery of Maths and English is Key to Development



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“The lack of proficiency in [mathematics and English] is not just an academic issue but one that could have long-term socio-economic consequences”; the words of Dr Wayne Wesley, Chief Executive Officer of the Caribbean Examinations Council, reported in the Barbados *Nation* newspaper of August 21. Dr Wesley was delivering the results of the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate, in which just over fifty percent of students had achieved a passing grade in both subjects. He continued that English and mathematics were fundamental to functioning in today’s world, “the foundation on which anything else can be acquired or learned or achieved”.

The problem is larger than is reflected in the CXC results; to the number of those who failed to reach the passing grade must be added those who dropped out of secondary school and those who did not take the maths and English exams. In the same *Nation* article we are reminded of the poor results in these core subjects of Barbadian primary school students who took the Barbados Secondary Schools Entrance Exam, an assessment of their proficiency at the start of their secondary school experience. The majority of

Barbadian students were found to lack acceptable competency in maths and English at that stage of their education.

Because maths and English are the foundation on which other knowledge is built, they are the key to raising the skills and improving the quality and productivity of the Caribbean labour force. Improved labour productivity in turn plays a crucial role in maintaining and improving the international competitiveness of Caribbean exports, tourism, and other foreign earning activities.

Foreign currency is the fuel on which the Caribbean economy runs, because it provides the wherewithal to purchase the imports needed for the daily activities of consumers and producers in the region. The earnings from exports, tourism and other services the Caribbean provides to the rest of the world sustain domestic economic activity and the jobs and livelihoods of Caribbean people. The Caribbean attracts international customers to provide a continuous inflow of foreign currency by offering goods and services that give good value for money, in competition with other countries that are providing similar products and services. As far as Caribbean exporters and hoteliers are concerned, the prices they must match can be no higher than the ruling US dollar price for the quality of the product or service they offer. In order to maintain their share of the international market they must therefore match the productivity increases of their competitors. They may go one better if their productivity gains outpace their market rivals, either by increasing market share or by moving upmarket where they can compete at a higher price point.

In addition to its crucial contribution to the quality of the workforce and international competitiveness, a sound education contributes directly to the development of the society. This is reflected in the *Human Development Index*, published by the United Nations Development Programme; for any given level of average incomes, the country which achieves better educational outcomes ranks well ahead of its peers. Even so, the Index understates the benefit, because it does not include a measure of the quality of education, for lack of comparable data for all countries. Communities of individuals all with a sound education enjoy a better quality of life than communities of the poorly educated, even where they both enjoy comparable incomes.

For reasons of both social and economic development, the Caribbean needs to improve educational outcomes. That effort has to begin with well-informed strategies to provide all students graduating from primary and secondary schools with competency in maths and English. Maths and English are not the be-all and end-all, but they are the essential pillars on which our system of knowledge is built. Students who are equipped with competencies in maths and English may take full advantage of opportunities to further their knowledge and expertise, on the path to productive and fulfilling lives.

My Economic Letters may be found under "[Commentary](#)" at DeLisleWorrell.com.