

Visions and Revisions

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In *Inward Hunger: The Education of a Prime Minister*, Dr. Eric Williams recalls a 1962 speech, in which he proclaimed, “Let the secondary school be the cradle of the new nationalism of Trinidad and Tobago, assimilating all the different cultural stocks and strains in this society... which has one aim in view – the repudiation of the absurd and irrational prejudices imposed on it from above.”

This was part of Williams’ vision for a newly independent Trinidad and Tobago. Recent discussions on education may well lead us to reflect on how easy it is for visions to remain unproductive. “Absurd and irrational prejudices” abound in discussions on education conducted in this country in recent times.

Without vision, the most ambitious policies and the best management practices will do little to move this country towards true excellence in education, although such practices and policies are necessary to counteract what may actually be harmful.

However, we have ample evidence that a vision that may have served a country well in one era can become inadequate at another stage of its development—many today will question whether the assimilation envisioned by Dr. Williams is an appropriate goal for the many different groups in our country today.

As we work towards Vision 2020, therefore, we must revisit the visions that may have energised the educational reform process in the past, and ask hard questions about their appropriateness for our country today. One such vision, clearly, is that of an educational process that will “assimilate all the different cultural stocks and strains.” Recent discussions make it obvious that for different groups in our society, assimilation carries with it the threat of cultural demise and political powerlessness. It is clear, too, that for many today, equity in education and democratisation of the educational process must mean more than more school places for all, more schools for different religious denominations, more plans for affirmative action in education, or adding more curriculum content that will pay lip-service to the cultural experiences of one or two more of the many existing and emerging subcultures in our society.

Coming to terms with the issue of cultural diversity in the discussion of educational reform may be a hard process, fraught with the danger of conflict and further divisiveness. Yet, clearly, the myth of a rainbow country does not work for us any more. Conflict and tension do exist beneath the surface—and not too far beneath either, judging by the ease with which they find expression when we try to account for the limitations and failures of our education system.

One area in which we have not yet dealt adequately with those differences is the curriculum. We have initiated a programme of curriculum reform that has acknowledged diversity, but that has not yet done enough to address its challenges.

We have committed to a student-centred curriculum, for instance. In doing so, however, we seem to have envisaged students who somehow remain untouched by the issues of difference that are part of their daily lives in their communities, and who leave experiences and understandings developed in those communities behind when they try to negotiate the school curriculum.

Our school curricula attempt to deal with differences by adding bits and pieces that reflect fragments of the complex cultural heritage of different groups. For example, we advocate more pan in schools or more Hindi; we develop curriculum units planned around themes of national festivals—Divali, Eid, or Carnival—in season.

The attempt is laudable, but we may have committed ourselves to a losing battle. In a contested curriculum, constrained by issues of time and space, how will we decide whose practices “deserve” to be included for study and whose must be left out. For example, we teach the history of slavery and indentureship, but shouldn’t our children also learn about the coming of the Syrians and Lebanese? We acknowledge the festivals of Christians, Hindus, and Muslims, but how will we accommodate those of the Baha’i or of the Orisha in our schools? Will we simply erect new buildings where different cultures and beliefs can find a home? And, if we commit to that course of action, whose claim will have greater validity by 2020, given that our resources are finite?

Moreover, attempts to persuade us of the failure of leadership of this group or that, of the deficiencies of this culture or that, or of the failure of this group or that to teach our children adequately, constitute attempts to construct us as persons of single identities, when it is obvious that, as social beings, we experience ourselves as having multiple identities.

One lesson of the hidden curriculum inherent in how we deal with diversity in our schools today is that, for many persons in our society, to be “different” in any existing dispensation is still to be voiceless. Our vision for the twenty-first century must, above all, encompass an experience of schooling in which each student finds his or her own multiple voices. “Tolerance” of diversity must be replaced by respect for, and celebration of, the resources available to us as a consequence of our differences, as well as of our common experiences. The exploration of “difference” in the school curriculum, moreover, must have as a primary goal that students will recognise that, as Caribbean people, they are not limited to one self or another, but that in themselves they contain multitudes.

We must begin to envision curriculum experiences that embody these understandings and attitudes. Clearly, there is room to impart knowledge about these issues in almost any existing subject in the curriculum. The challenge is to ensure that those understandings inform how our students live their lives. How, for instance, can the concepts of multiple persons in one God, of Shiva as both destroyer and creator, or the experience of putting on and taking off different masques in Carnival, be used to inform discussion about the multiple possibilities inherent in individual “selves”?

We must also provide opportunities for students to reflect on how certain discourses limit them, and to challenge those discourses. Indigenous literacies, therefore, together with critical literacy, must join functional literacy as key skills to be taught in the curriculum.

Moreover, we must address these issues urgently. We speak of a vision for the future, but the challenges and the opportunities are ours today—for us, the future is now.

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