

Magnet Schools

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In 1999, an Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) report revealed that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) had received an IADB loan of US\$105 million to reform and expand secondary education. Among the projects identified was the establishment of a magnet school programme. On June 16, 2004, the Hon. Minister of Education announced in the Senate that architectural briefs were being prepared for magnet schools. She explained that “a magnet school is one which is equipped to attract students of special aptitudes, special abilities and interest in a particular field.”

More recently, an official of the Ministry of Education (MOE) announced that based on reports from a fact-finding mission to London, five magnet schools would soon be constructed, specialising in Information Technology, Performing Arts, and Physical Education. Magnet schools were introduced in the US in response to increasing pressure for desegregation. These schools deliver a specialised curriculum and employ innovative educational practices in order to attract a diverse student population.

This article takes the position that the introduction of magnet schools in T&T will track 11+ students into narrow specialisations at too early an age, denying them broad educational opportunities that would enable them to awaken a wider range of dormant abilities. Furthermore, the decision to introduce magnet schools appears inconsistent with recent decisions by the MOE to defer specialised crafts to the post-secondary level. This new kind of school promises to further stratify the hierarchical structure of secondary schools in T&T, driving those schools at the lowest rung of public perception to even lower levels.

I am suggesting that the government should review this decision, and reform secondary education to prepare students for living meaningful lives and for genuine participation in the society. There are other programmes that should be pursued more vigorously in secondary schools, which are informed by the educational objectives for T&T listed in the *Education Policy Paper 1993-2003* (White Paper), and from the current literature on secondary education.

The authors of the White Paper found that there was a shared belief among citizens of T&T that appropriate education could boost economic development. However, this finding does not necessarily mean that students should be trained for specific occupations in secondary schools, because nowadays job-specific knowledge is rendered obsolete almost as fast as it is generated. Schools should therefore equip students with generic knowledge and skills, together with a commitment to lifelong learning.

This approach involves a general induction into the work culture, so that students learn how jobs are created and lost, what employers expect of workers, workplace norms, and work ethics. Students should be involved in investigating the growth potential, demands, and requirements of different occupations, and they should be provided with opportunities for limited work experience while at school. Secondary schools should also

offer broad programmes of enterprise education aimed at developing action-oriented graduates who are able to identify entrepreneurial opportunities. In other words, students should be able to evaluate changing events to identify economic opportunities. One way of doing so is by involving students in practical business operations while at school.

The White Paper identifies other objectives to be achieved by the education system of T&T, among which is the creation of individuals with the capacity to develop and lead future societies, while having the foundation for achievement of personal goals. Fundamental values such as decency, love, and honesty are recognised as major determinants for survival in the society, together with higher-order literacy, and problem-solving and social skills.

In meeting these objectives, secondary education in T&T cannot be based on academic studies that are isolated from practical effort. Students should learn practical skills that will empower them to apply the principles they have discovered in academic subjects to identify and solve problems, and to otherwise control their environment. To this end, students should be engaged in identifying and solving problems using simple tools, practical skills, and locally available resources.

However, not all of the skills developed at the secondary schools should be for utilitarian purposes; some skills should satisfy the creative and aesthetic needs that drive most human beings. The secondary school should formally introduce students to activities that can lay a foundation for the development of enduring hobbies and pastimes, which can provide sources of personal fulfilment over a lifetime. Students should be formally exposed to a wide range of avocational pursuits such as sports, arts, crafts, camping, horticulture, wood and metalworking, and debating and public speaking. These activities can allow students to achieve success and make them resilient to negative forces that beset the idle. Such a programme will be difficult to implement with the traditional 35-hour week system, and more attention needs to be given to the extended day concept that was mentioned by Prof. John Spence in his *Express column of December 16, 2004*.

Another important purpose of education is to develop higher-order literacy. This means that the regular school subjects such as history, social studies, geography, economics, and literature, among other subjects, should be taught in a manner that would enable students to apply their knowledge to make informed choices, and contribute intelligently to discussions on the implications of national events and political decisions on their lives. For example, students should be engaged in making critical evaluations of proposals for national development, media reports, and political decisions, in order to reveal hidden agendas, faulty premises, and contradiction of ethical, moral, and democratic principles. Subjects taught at the secondary level should transcend knowledge accumulation and should provide students with lenses for reflection on the human condition in society.

In countering the poor youth socialisation that is evident in this society, secondary schools need to provide more meaningful programmes geared towards social development. Therefore, the MOE should reconsider any programme that will track students into early specialisation, such as that of magnet schools. The objectives

embodied in the White Paper should be revisited and used to guide the secondary school programme.

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