

On Your Marks, Teachers

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Part 1

At the invitation of the Ministry of Education (MOE), I recently had the privilege of making a presentation to principals and vice-principals of secondary schools on their role in the implementation of the formal curriculum. This focus fed into what the Ministry, under the Secondary Education Modernization Programme (SEMP), is introducing as its new core curriculum.

School administrators were apprised of new and aggressive thrusts by the MOE, which are intended to ensure that varied approaches to teaching and learning are applied in the nation's classrooms so as to facilitate the multiplicity of learning styles and permutations of intelligences that teachers encounter amongst their students.

Teachers in the classroom need to be aware that the administrators of their schools are being urged to institute macro and micro policies which would require the cooperation of all school personnel. They should expect their principals and vice-principals to be keenly focused on clearly stated goals, and that these goals would be communicated in ways that demonstrate their logic, their relevance to a broader mission, and their ultimate role in improving students' experience of schooling.

Another reality that teachers should be alert to is that school administrators are accountable to stakeholders other than themselves—students, policy makers, parents, and the wider community. Generally speaking, teachers' efforts are concentrated on the classroom and specific student-related elements. Administrators ideally spend their time finding ways to implement best practice, ways that are sometimes inconvenient and tiring to the classroom practitioner. Seeing the big picture is normally the chasm that separates the administrator's office from the staffroom.

Administrators are cognisant of the reality that teachers are the main vehicle through which the curriculum can be effectively implemented. As such, teachers will be called upon to draw on their every professional and personal resource in ways that would require them to be innovative and creative, and to think "outside the box." A philosophical examination of the notion of change, its purpose, and the implications of change may be a good place to start dealing with the new behaviours that they are expected to engage in.

Are teachers ready for yet another tsunami of requests, demands, supplications, mandates? Have they yet mastered certain basics so that they can move on to novel approaches, using novel instruments for teaching? And how are they to be made ready? In order to be "on their marks," to be "ready," and "to go," teachers will have to adopt a philosophy that celebrates continuous learning as an appreciation of life and what it has to offer, and of what their own lives have to offer to the world. It is a philosophy that understands that stagnation breeds death, not only theirs but that of their charges. This

reminds me of the announcement made by all flight attendants that in the event of an emergency, adults must secure their own oxygen mask before attending to others in their charge.

In terms of basics, if teachers do not plan with clear, common objectives in mind, nor use appropriate measurement procedures to ascertain the achievement of those objectives, then they clearly do not see the wisdom of a written curriculum. Their planning would then be ad hoc, accounting to no one, and certainly destabilizing one of the main intentions of a written curriculum, which is to create equity in schooling, at least in terms of students' exposure during classroom time.

If they are not willing to learn from one another and view scrutiny suspiciously, their life in the new professional world will be mental torture. It goes without saying that there may be instances where they have been "burnt" by less than ideal experiences of poor administrative practices, with "lording it over you" practices disguised as "clinical supervision of teaching," and with "administrative announcements" replacing "collegial discussions," as examples. Nevertheless, I have always maintained that teachers have power and influence too. They are also in a position to set standards that they find lacking in administration. They can choose to become effective communicators, change managers, character builders, and envisioners, lighting the way for those with official authority. There are teachers in our system who demonstrate impeccable manners, treat all with dignity, and maintain their decorum despite the circumstances.

What is left then is for that goodwill, that common sense, that high academic standing, that claim to be professional, to translate into attitudes and behaviours that would sustain the "on your marks" position, because there will always be a race to run.

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