

## **Transforming our Classrooms**

By Michael Kallon

As many as ten thousand “unqualified” youths will enter the Caribbean labour market by the end of 2003. However, 60 percent of the jobs being created in the Caribbean require at least a secondary school education or some form of specialised training. Representatives of the business class in the region have been very critical of what they perceive as a mismatch between the curriculum and the requirements of the job market. In recent years, as well, there has been a huge outcry about the quality of the students graduating from our education system. The system has been accused of producing mediocre students who lack the level of literacy and numeracy skills required to function adequately in this technological age.

Despite the concerns expressed, the situation in our classrooms has not changed significantly. A considerable proportion of our teachers are in dire need of in-service training in new educational philosophies and pedagogical styles. In addition, they lack many of the resources required to meet the challenges facing them. Because of this, most of the classrooms in Trinidad and Tobago continue to follow a curriculum that reflects a transmission or, at best, a transaction ideology.

A transmission approach focuses on mastery of traditional, academic subject matter and is taught essentially through traditional methodologies: textbook learning, rote memorisation, recitation, practice/drill, mastery of cognitive routines, and inculcation of information. In this curriculum orientation, the teacher is viewed as the information provider, and trainer in skills and routine problem solving. A transmission or mechanical/technical mode of operation is primarily a one-way linear movement; that is, from the teacher to the learner. The teacher is the source of all knowledge, and has the solutions to all problems. With the chalk-and-talk method, which essentially uses the traditional methodologies referred to earlier, the process is not only linear and mechanistic, making little or no provision for the children to develop their inner capabilities, but has also come to depend on the teacher's knowledge, judgment, and ability.

This mechanistic orientation is inadequate for the goals currently espoused by our education system because students are not “*tabulae rasae*” (blank slates) as the transmission model implies. Rather, children bring a plethora of ideas, beliefs, and concepts to the classroom that teachers need to tap into. Studies have shown that on the basis of their everyday experiences of the world, children develop beliefs and concepts that are not isolated ideas but, rather, provide a coherent and sensible understanding of the world from a child's perspective.

Although the transmission mode has not been totally abandoned, there seems to be a shift to an alternative framework that is described as “transaction”, reflecting a constructivist view of learning based on discovery, group work, decision making, project method, and which is activity-oriented. The implication of this framework for schools is that it leads to broader-based knowledge acquisition, which allows the learners to discover for themselves and engage in independent learning. Telling them and then testing them on what they have been told, inevitably has the effect of producing bench-bound learners whose motivation for learning is likely to be negatively affected. The role of the teacher is to initiate learning, not stifle it. Teachers should encourage their students to enquire, question, debate, and critique rather than appear to be the guardians of infallible truths and therefore infallible themselves.

Although the transaction model is a step in the right direction, it does not provide an orientation towards "empowerment" and "informed responsible action", which educators refer to as "transformational" learning. To be more effective, the teaching in our schools should be strongly linked to the interrelatedness of phenomena and recognition of the wholeness of the child. The transformation approach seeks to ensure a better fit between the individual and society. It places greater emphasis on problem-solving skills whereby the learners make use of their environment, experience, and interest in working towards the objectives of the curriculum. Encouraging learners to research different aspects of their community, while employing skills of observation, questioning, discussing, and sharing with other members of the class allows them to be more skilled in human

interaction. The transformation position asserts that students should learn to see relationships between themselves and their social environment, and between themselves and all aspects of the curriculum. It stresses societal needs over individual needs and encourages creative thinking and social awareness.

Educators who subscribe to the transformation position acknowledge that intellectual development cannot be isolated from emotional, aesthetic, social, physical, spiritual, and moral development, and that the curriculum should provide learning experiences related to interdisciplinary activities and oriented around projects of a social nature or activities related to self-inquiry. Each child is recognized as unique and as an individual requiring responses to individual needs and concerns, but with the understanding that all individuals share such common human concerns as the need for meaning. Teachers believe that students should have as much control as possible over their own learning so that they can become self-motivated, self-directed problem solvers. The teacher's role in this approach becomes that of advisor and guide rather than that of a pure instructor. For this approach to be really effective, it is necessary not only to use the environment as a source of educational experience, but also to ensure that community members should, as far as practicable, participate in the education process. To this end, some of the lessons should take place outside the classroom/school and the interest and support of parents and community members must be gained for success to be possible.

This position focuses on personal and social change encompassing three specific orientations: (a) skills that promote personal and social transformation, (b) a vision of social change leading to harmony with the environment, and (c) an attribution of spiritual dimension to the environment. In sum, holistic learning is at the heart of the transformation position. This is the framework that I would recommend as an alternative pedagogical strategy for schools in Trinidad and Tobago.

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