

## **Calming Fears About CAPE**

Patricia Worrell

Six years after the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) introduced the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examinations (CAPE) as its post-secondary examination in the rest of the Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago is preparing to test the CAPE waters. For stakeholders in this country, CAPE is an innovation. The developers of the examination, CXC, and the Ministry of Education are hoping the innovation will take root in our education system.

Educators, together with the students who will be expected to write the examination and their parents, are not all convinced of the wisdom of introducing CAPE. Students' and parents' doubts seem to be fuelled as much by the reservations some teachers and principals are expressing about the introduction of CAPE as by their own concerns about the examination.

In the six years since the examinations were first introduced into the Caribbean, CXC has been making a serious effort to respond to the comments of stakeholders in those schools that embraced the examination from the outset. Therefore, educators and students in Trinidad and Tobago can be at least assured that many of the shortcomings which stakeholders in other countries identified within the original syllabuses have been addressed. In addition, CXC has had six years to refine the administrative procedures for the delivery of the examination.

It does not seem to me that the discussions about CAPE which are currently taking place in schools throughout the country are sufficiently informed by an awareness of the process of review and revision that CAPE has undergone since its inception.

However, what is clear to me is that, as has so often happened with other innovations introduced into our schools in the past, CAPE may be placed in the schools without adequate care being taken to develop an effective communication strategy for its diffusion. To be effective, any communication strategy must be informed by an understanding of important issues that must be addressed when educational innovations are being introduced into the schools and the society.

The first aim of any communication strategy must be to ensure that over a period of time, members of the society receive reliable information about the innovation through a number of different channels. This is what Everett Rogers terms "diffusion of an innovation." This may seem to be an obvious approach. Too often, however, those responsible for introducing innovations seem more committed to hype than to effective diffusion.

In the second place, any communication strategy must combine the intention to provide information with the recognition that simply to place information about a proposed innovation in people's laps probably won't do much to lay their uncertainties to rest. As I spoke to teachers about CAPE last week, I heard myself telling them about the actions

that had been taken to deal with some of the concerns they were expressing. Some raised the question of how they were to juggle the competing demands of CAPE and the Cambridge A'Level examinations already in place. Others spoke of teachers' perennial concerns about CXC's determination to maintain the School-Based Assessment (the SBAs).

Even as I explained to teachers how CXC had reduced the number of SBAs, and as I heard principals repeat what they had been told—that universities in the Caribbean and abroad had accepted the examination as a qualification for entry to programmes of tertiary education—I could see that the information wasn't doing much to reassure them.

I had to remind myself that we were trying to rationalise away their fears. They, on the other hand, were trying to come to terms with the unpredictability that the introduction of CAPE implies. Educators know that all the planning in the world will not prepare them for every possible challenge that the introduction of the examination will throw at them.

What many of them need now is not just a litany of reassurances but a communication strategy that will equip them to deal with the challenges they can expect. Such a strategy will need to focus not on throwing more information at them, but on facilitating a process by which educators continue to talk to each other about CAPE as they begin to teach CAPE programmes in the schools.

The initial workshops now carded for the July holidays will undoubtedly have their role in the process. However, they are not going to be adequate substitutes for ongoing dialogue among teachers and their colleagues. Experience has shown that when educators can share information about successful approaches to curriculum delivery, they are much more likely to be convinced about the probable worth of curriculum innovations, and to try to implement them.

This collegial interaction will be crucial to the successful implementation of CAPE. What arrangements are being put in place therefore to facilitate such interaction? Is it being acknowledged that too often teachers are rushed off their feet by demanding timetables, or have for so long been part of a culture of teaching in isolation that such collaboration will not take place unless adequate time and resources are made available to facilitate the process?

And what about the timing of communication about CAPE—will responses to educators' and students' concerns be timely? Is an effective structure in place for accessing feedback from stakeholders and responding to it? The teachers to whom I spoke repeatedly expressed the fear that they will encounter problems and then find themselves out on a limb with nobody paying attention to their concerns. As one principal told me, "In the end, when problems arise, parents come to us for solutions, not to CXC or the Ministry".

The final issue an effective communication strategy must address is the consistency of messages sent to schools from the Council and the Ministry of Education about the examination. It is vital that teachers and principals be reassured from the earliest stages

that any commitments made to them will be scrupulously kept. Neither institution can afford, in these early stages, to have schools feeling that while they have been promised a quality examination, important details are still being left unattended.

For instance, will necessary resource materials be made available to schools? Does every school have all the syllabus documents it needs? Do teachers understand clearly what they will be required to do as they implement new techniques?

Those committed to introducing the new examination must recognise that educators will be noting any contradictions between promises and practice, and will be reading in them the signs of things to come.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine