

## **“People Who Live By the Mind”**

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From outside the complexity and chaos that increasingly seem to characterise our education system today, a growing chorus of voices prescribes solutions to the problems facing the system.

One of the more consistent analysts has been Lloyd Best, who last week articulated what appears to be his own sense of commitment to the process of social improvement: “People who live by the mind,” Mr. Best says, “are compelled to describe what they see on the ground in the hope that critics will one day perceive the point, even if they do not do so now.”

That compulsion has helped to shape Mr. Best as one of those visionaries who have consistently tried to point out to our society the potential for change and improvement that we continue to misuse or ignore.

At the same time, many of us at the School of Education operate from a somewhat different understanding of how effective change and sustained improvement might best be facilitated in the field of education. We have learned, painfully, the lesson of history—that change, however formidable the mind that conceptualises it, will not occur in systems or institutions if people fail to change.

Mr. Best has himself admitted that “time and again” he has had to clear up misunderstandings of arguments he has presented, or of solutions he has proposed, however lucidly and articulately. He speaks, in this connection, of our society’s “innocence,...half education and half literacy.”

The question must be asked: Why, after years of education, not only through formal schooling, but also through the analyses of our most respected intellectuals, and through the guidance provided by a range of institutes and institutions, do so many of our people continue to betray themselves as “half educated” and “innocent”?

The history of formal education, here in Trinidad and Tobago and internationally, has included instances where societies have depended for improvement on their philosophers and scientists—thinkers who brought the light of their minds and of new technologies to bear on the thornier educational problems of different generations.

The history of formal education has also been that, by and large, experts’ proposals for change and improvement have not worked. The history of the implementation of educational reform has not been impressive. Mahatma Gandhi, when asked what he thought of Western civilization, is said to have remarked that he thought it would be a very good thing. We could say the same thing of almost every reform proposed by the great minds of different eras—discovery learning or mastery learning, for instance, each had its own potential to do good. Yet, all we can do after so many years is to conjecture that they would be very good things, if they were ever successfully implemented.

What has frustrated the realisation of their potential? One answer may well lie in the types of relationships that have traditionally existed between people who “live by the mind,” and the people doing battle in the educational trenches. Traditionally, our experts have shared the benefits of their analyses and their conclusions by way of proposals for change, which practitioners have largely ignored or, if those changes are prescribed, circumvented.

What the historical evidence suggests is that the adoption of change is essentially a pragmatic decision: people change to the extent that they have constructed new understandings, beliefs, and values about “best practices.” These, however, are not deemed to be “best” in any absolute manner—they are “best” because they work in specific contexts and in dealing with specific issues. Moreover, people construct understandings about new practices only to the extent that they have taken responsibility to deal actively with the challenges of their own practice as educators, and to reflect upon the significance of their experiences. This is the essence of a constructivist epistemology.

It serves no purpose, therefore, to transmit to practitioners our expert analyses of the contexts in which they operate if we have not had to make the hundreds of decisions about school and classroom dynamics that practitioners make from day to day, from class to class, and from second to second. It serves no purpose, either, to propose solutions to problems of which we may have only a theoretical understanding.

The role of the university—and not merely of the School of Education, because the enterprise is by definition cross-disciplinary—must be to establish partnerships with practitioners to solve problems that those practitioners have identified as urgent. And we must do so respectfully, recognising that we can neither define their problems for them nor manage the solutions. SERVOL learned this lesson early, and may be considered one of our success stories in education because of it. The SERVOL programme is premised on the belief that those who experience a problem should define it, though others work with them to find solutions, for which they take responsibility.

Within these partnerships, it is not we who live by the mind, but practitioners in the schools who will establish agendas for change, based on the urgent needs they must address in their daily practice. Solutions proposed should be developed collaboratively within such partnerships, and the best role for those traditionally considered the “experts” must be to provide guidance as required and requested. A process of action research will also be necessary; to provide opportunities for developing substantive theories about what is actually happening in our schools and classrooms. Again, in a society where research is not a significant cultural practice among educators, we “experts” may have a role to play in helping practitioners to plan research to meet their own needs.

Nor should we presume to generalise findings to all educational contexts in our country until enough networking among partnership groups has taken place to permit the development of formal theories appropriate to our situation.

If we commit to partnerships such as these, we must begin to work out what inter- and intra-organisational structures should be put in place to facilitate such working relationships. But first, we must commit to our own change, as we learn to facilitate, and not to take ownership of, the process of change.

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