

The Curriculum and Sustainable Development

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The United Nations has designated 2005-2014 as the decade of Education for Sustainable Development. The concept of “sustainable development” has evolved considerably since the 1980s, when it first became apparent that human beings were imperilling the planet and the well-being of future generations. The drive to achieve economic and social progress was being satisfied at great cost to our physical environment. This recognition created a challenge—to promote development strategies that would not result in further harm to the ecosystem.

Since then we have recognised that human contexts for sustainable development are just as important. All our developmental choices must ensure continuous improvement not only for ourselves but also for those who will follow us. Thus, we must acknowledge the interconnectedness of past, present, and future generations and learn to respect our common heritage.

In Trinidad and Tobago, our actions often reflect a very limited understanding of sustainable development. Daily we experience the destruction of landmarks and features of our physical environment that should have been preserved and protected for our own and future generations. Daily we see evidence of an ever-widening gap between generations, and a growing disrespect for human life, and, daily, too, we experience the physical and social effects of such disrespect in the natural disasters, and the increasing cruelty and dehumanisation that are becoming routine features of our daily lives. The imposing new buildings being constructed every day tower over deteriorating, filthy cityscapes, where citizens are routinely subjected to crime and violence.

We must therefore acknowledge the urgent need for education for sustainable development. At the national level, many curriculum guides already identify environmental and relationship issues as important dimensions of curriculum content. The social studies, visual and performing arts, and health and family life curriculum documents are among many that deal with such issues.

However, curriculum documents are merely guides. Unless sustainable development concepts become entrenched in our institutional and enacted curricula, the decade will pass and this country will see no positive social consequences.

What signs should we look for, then, to ensure that such curriculum content is actually being implemented, and that intended outcomes are being attained? Two fundamental criteria for assessing a school’s curriculum for sustainable development must surely be the nature of the school’s physical environment and the quality of human relationships.

Decrepit and uncomfortable schools and classrooms, litter and dirt, all constitute a powerful hidden curriculum which teaches important but undesirable lessons to young people about the value we have for our physical environment.

We need, then, to consider whether school policies incorporate standards related to the physical environment in which the curriculum is delivered, and allocate partial responsibility to students for upholding those standards.

Just as important, however, are practices that undermine the quality of human relationships. What sort of a communication climate exists in the school? Do members of the school community enjoy honest and open relationships? What messages are being communicated about the need for the generations to respect each other?

It is not yet routine practice to formulate specific policies to support healthy communication in schools, but we must do so. We also need to develop communication competencies across the planned curriculum, and establish mechanisms to monitor and acknowledge the development of such competencies. Possibly, communication could become part of each school's core curriculum, subsuming language as just one area of competence in the field.

These provisions should be seen as critical. Without them, all education for sustainable development will be mere window dressing.

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