

In Times of Crisis

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“There were ‘knowledge gaps’, and our schools were under accusation for creating them...It is not surprising that the principal focus of the educational reforms of the day was on science and mathematics...Guided by these new principles science and mathematics curricula flourished. Almost everything else was taken for granted....It was the “discovery of poverty” ..that woke most of us from our unthinking complacency about reforming education – especially the discovery of the impact of poverty, racism and alienation on the mental life and growth of the child victims of these blights. A theory of education that was to serve all could no longer take for granted the supporting assistance of a benign, even a neutral culture.”

Thus the psychologist Jerome Bruner describes how one of America’s richest eras of educational research and reform failed to result in effective social change. The educational research of the 1960s and 70s supported the development of America’s power and wealth, but ignored its major social and cultural ills—until the explosion of the Civil Rights movement awakened that country to the pain being experienced by the forgotten people of their society, and to its repercussions on the complacent lives of the well-to-do.

Here in Trinidad and Tobago we are now awakening to the pain and despair of our own victims of social injustice. As has happened everywhere in the world, our educators are being asked what education has done to support social change. And as has happened everywhere else in the world, the answer is – not enough. Nevertheless, before we rush to establish a new educational agenda, perhaps we should pause to ask where our greatest efforts should be directed.

In times of crisis, the temptation is always to be reactive. At the School of Education we are often asked these days about what we are doing to produce teachers with the skills to reduce illiteracy and innumeracy. What have we done recently to help develop curricula that will produce ideal students, happy in school, and committed to lifelong learning? Are we producing citizens who are socially adept, with good values? What have we done to create entrepreneurs with knowledge of cutting-edge technology? If we have not accomplished these things, what research are we conducting, and what programmes are we developing to solve all our society’s problems? And why, we are asked, was this not accomplished yesterday? The answer is always – not enough. We might always do more.

But first, we must know what “more” will have the best long-term effects. Countries have always sought to use education to address their social problems. The “more developed” allocate considerable financial and intellectual resources to reform their educational systems. We are aware of this because our most effective teachers—graduates, ironically, of our own teacher education programmes—are continuously being recruited to work in those “reformed systems.” Yet illiteracy, innumeracy, violence, and crime remain critical issues in those countries. Bruner suggests that before devising new pedagogies and

educational technologies, researchers should first seek to understand the role of culture in education.

In truth, educational outcomes are shaped by a complex mix of conditions. As educational researchers discover and recommend ways to make teaching and learning more effective, we must also understand the political processes involved when policy makers choose to adopt or reject our recommendations. We must understand, further, the cultural and affective changes required in schools where those reforms must be implemented, and in the homes from which students come. Above all, as we have discovered while conducting research projects at the School of Education, these understandings must be informed by the perspectives of those in the educational trenches.

Often, such investigations do not fall within traditional research paradigms. And they certainly do not constitute the only platform upon which a multi-disciplinary educational research agenda should be built, nor the one that will obtain the most immediate applause—or support. But they are necessary steps towards effective educational reform in a time of despair.

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