

Raising Our Standards

Patricia Worrell

Following the recent public consultations about standards for early childhood education, the Ministry of Education recently published two new sets of standards. The Ministry has invited the public to air their views on these in a number of public consultations, which are due to begin shortly. These consultations represent an opportunity for all of us who have a vested interest in the education of our children—which is to say, all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago—to shape the decisions that will affect the future of those children. As such, we all need to take an interest in these consultations. First, however, we must think carefully about the challenges that a standards-based approach presents for education planners.

On the face of it, such an approach is beyond criticism. Considerable sums of taxpayers' money have been spent on education in recent years, and we would all like to know that we are getting quality products in return for our investment. A standards-based approach is also a necessary step towards accountability. If agreed-on standards are not met, questions may justifiably be asked about what went wrong, how, and to what extent—something we have sorely missed in our approach to education so far.

Nonetheless, we must be careful, as we enter into the standards labyrinth, that we do not lose sight of our goals for education. And there is evidence that this has sometimes happened in other places that have embraced the standards approach, and have attempted to introduce a standardised curriculum.

What demands will a standardised curriculum make? According to one definition, standards are descriptions of what learners should know and be able to do at specific points in their education. Standardised testing is often one means employed to ensure that standards have been attained. It may thus be argued that curriculum standards can help to make teachers' lives easier as well, providing them with a clear map as to the direction in which they should be going, and a description of what conditions will signal that they have arrived.

The challenge lies in creating standards that support teachers in their classrooms, but don't restrict them unreasonably. We have embraced the philosophy that the curriculum must be learner-centred. However, a learner-centred curriculum must, clearly, be developmentally appropriate, and we know that all learners do not develop optimally as a result of the same educational experiences. It is in this context that curriculum standards have the potential to militate against best teaching practice, if they are not sensitively designed.

In addition, experience has taught us that curriculum documents are already treated by many teachers as exact specifications of what they must be doing at stipulated times, rather than as guidelines towards their attaining goals that all agree are desirable. It must be admitted that the format of some of these documents suggests that such an inflexible observance of suggested approaches is, in fact, expected. How much more is this likely to

be the case when specific content and performance standards are defined for different levels of the curriculum?

Finally, unless teacher development programmes are sensitive to the dangers posed in this regard, and prepare teachers to maintain learner-centred approaches, how likely is it that in attempting to satisfy the demands of increasing numbers of standardised tests, our teachers will be even more inclined than they already are to teach to the test, thus losing sight of other curriculum goals, the attainment of which is just as important as those that are actually being measured by those tests?

Any standards-based approach to curriculum planning must take into careful consideration all these challenges to its successful implementation, or we may end up even worse than when we started.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine