

New Agendas for Caribbean Education

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The Biennial Conference on Education now underway at The University of the West Indies (UWI) has as its theme, “Reconceptualising the Agenda for Education in the Caribbean.” The conference provides a timely opportunity to address a topic that merits serious consideration. Despite the vast amounts of material, economic, and human resources expended, education in the twenty-first century Caribbean has not yet accomplished some basic and enduring objectives. Caribbean educators and policy makers must also address new challenges that arise from day to day.

The issues are many and varied. As we move closer to full Caribbean integration with the coming of the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME), our education systems must prepare citizens to grapple with opportunities and tensions that are already being created, and that can be expected to increase. Troubling social trends, such as the rapid increase in crime and health-related concerns, have become increasingly apparent across national borders. We have become signatories to international agreements such as the World Declaration on Education for All, with their accompanying commitments. Moreover, prepared or not, we must deal with the demands of the information society and the knowledge economy.

All these challenges have arisen while we continue to deal with long-standing issues such as unsatisfactory levels of literacy and numeracy across the region, and the need to provide education that is multicultural but which will also celebrate our common Caribbean identity. We must also address the incontrovertible fact that the many educational innovations which have been introduced over the years have often not resulted in any meaningful change.

Three overarching concerns must inform any attempt to reconceptualise the education agenda in the region: 1) how to establish more effective relationships between schools and their communities, 2) how to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) most effectively, and 3) how to design more effective approaches to educational research. In addressing these concerns, we will at the same time be dealing with a number of related issues.

In attempting to reconceptualise the school-community relationship, we must first clarify in our own minds which “communities” will be given priority. In planning national agendas for education, for instance, what do we actually want to teach our children about the relative merits of responsibility to regional and national communities, or even to community and to self? We must also devise ways of helping our students to make necessary border crossings between the common-sense knowledge valued in their communities of origin and the knowledge of academic disciplines that formal education is expected to develop.

Neither objective can be realised, however, unless we revisit our beliefs about the way the community should be encouraged to participate in the life of the school, and the

school in the life of the community. We need to think about what types of participation would be most effective, and what sorts of policies and organisational structures would best support the types of school-community relationships we want.

With respect to the role that ICTs should play in developing and implementing plans for education, we have begun to acknowledge that schools are also part of the information society. However, huge gaps still exist between the technological haves and have-nots in our education system, and a veritable chasm exists between technophobes and technophiles. Until these challenges are overcome, we will at best be paying lip-service to the importance of ICT in education.

Furthermore, we now tend to use ICT primarily as a tool to implement existing plans. Might we also use ICT to create different possible pathways for development, forecast possible results of implementing innovations within different types of education systems, and adjust our long-term educational planning in response?

Finally, we must reconceptualise our agenda for educational research. If we are truly committed to student-centred education, what different research methodologies would best capture necessary data on Caribbean students' experiences of their curricula and their schools? What arrangements would ensure that more of our research is actually used by policy makers across the region, instead of gathering dust on library shelves? And what sorts of new relationships might we need to forge among the chief participants in the research process if we are to achieve these ends?

These and other critical issues must be addressed at all levels of Caribbean education systems. The conference now underway creates an invaluable opportunity to share ideas and proposals on how we might address such issues most effectively.

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