

Dancing with Many Partners

Part 1

Patricia Worrell

During a recent discussion with teachers on how curriculum development and implementation processes could be most effectively managed, the issue of the extent to which stakeholders could feasibly be involved in the education decision-making process arose.

We were examining how curriculum panels and committees have been used by institutions like the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) and the Ministry of Education to encourage greater participation in education decision making. What troubled the group, however, was the apparent contradiction in the fact that while educators and other stakeholders are increasingly being invited to take part in the process, most of them are feeling more and more marginalised in these discussions, and are becoming increasingly cynical about how far their opinions and ideas will have any real impact on decisions. “We have consultation syndrome now,” one teacher said. “we only consulting and consulting; plenty talk, no difference.”

The attempt to involve the wider public in making education decisions is encouraging. For too long, decisions were made solely by technical experts or high-level administrators, while the people these decisions most affected were simply required to acquiesce. The assumption was that important issues were best left totally to the “experts.” Over time, though, the weaknesses of this approach have become evident.

In the first place, it assumes that “expertise” lies only in the hands of those who have been highly trained in the field. However, persons involved in informal education, and those with in-depth knowledge of the contexts of education and of teachers’ and students’ experiences, have knowledge that is very important for the effectiveness of the process. One of my colleagues frequently observes that the trouble with education is that since everybody has been to school, many people fancy themselves experts on issues they may know little about. From one perspective, this is true. From another, it might justifiably be argued that the only true experts on shoe design are those who must walk in those shoes.

In the second place, our commitment to democracy demands that persons affected by the process should be involved in the process. Justice also requires that people who pay for educational services—the taxpayers—should have an input in the processes by which services are designed.

Finally, the recognition has grown that if people are expected to embrace and implement policy, they must feel that they have had some input in policy formulation. Moreover, such participation helps stakeholders to construct clearer understandings of decisions and their implications, so that they know what is expected for implementation. Thus, in recent times, we have had consultations on early childhood education, on standards for the operations of schools, on the National Certificate of Secondary Education (NCSE) examination, and on violence and indiscipline in schools.

However, if the consultation process is to achieve its intended effects, some sensitivity to its demands is vital. Before inviting people to participate in a process of consultation and decision making, the objectives must be clear. Do we want, for instance, to encourage the development of a shared vision? Do we want to know how people are responding to decisions that have already been made? Or do we want to facilitate the increasing empowerment of the community to make decisions about issues that affect them?

Models of consultation suggest a continuum in decision making, from consultation as data gathering to collaboration—the increasing devolution of control over education policies and practices. Each approach has validity in different contexts and for different objectives, but each is fraught with challenges.

The experience of consultation has been aptly described by one analyst as “dancing with many partners.” If the attempt to consult is truly inclusive, participants come from a range of interest groups, with different, sometimes conflicting, types of interests, knowledge, and perceptions about the nature and functions of education. The interactions among these groups can be fraught with tension and conflict. Moreover, our education system continues to be markedly hierarchical, and different institutions, individuals, and groups have different levels of status and power. Thus, consultations may be dominated by the loudest or the most powerful participants.

The result is that the balance of power often remains the same. The consequence is a growing cynicism about the consultation process, which is potentially toxic to the effectiveness of the process. If public participation in the process is truly valued, then this development must be urgently addressed. Part 2 will provide suggestions on how this may be accomplished.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine