

Students of Today

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Perhaps one of the major frustrations faced by teachers today is that they often feel a deep sense of failure because they claim to be severely “challenged” to practise their profession—teaching. At all levels of the system, teachers complain about the lack of time to be a teacher, to truly facilitate learning, and to make that integral difference that is often spoken about. Some teachers blame today’s students suggesting that they are harder to teach; that they are less interested, unmotivated, or lack the necessary discipline. Teachers often comment that they feel that they have to be entertainers, counsellors, and even parents in the classroom, in order to compete with the many distractions that preoccupy students’ minds and capture their attention.

It is a fact that today’s students are different in one major respect from those of decades gone by. In the nineteen sixties and seventies, information about the world around was relatively difficult to obtain, and mostly available in books in schools and libraries. Today, however, with the advent of e-mail, the Internet, and other features of the information explosion and technological overload that define the digital era, our school children are faced with an avalanche of information in various formats. The ready availability of this volume of information has made obsolete the concept of schools and teachers as simply dispensers of knowledge. Teachers have to find a way to use the new formats, with which students appear to have an in-born affinity, to effect the curriculum.

However, even in some of the more sophisticated, up-to-date schools (there are a few in Trinidad and Tobago) that are able to provide high-tech environments for learning skills of inquiry and information processing and presentation, teachers still face difficulties in finding sufficient time for effecting “real” teaching and learning with the aid of these modern devices. Many would agree that a large part of the problem is a lack of proper teacher training in the areas of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the effective use of technology and media for classroom teaching, as well as the limited availability of equipment, infrastructure, and technical support [in schools] for teachers to effectively use the technology in their everyday teaching.

Another aspect of the challenge facing teachers of today’s students relates to the psychosocial environment from which the students come to the classroom. Often, teachers know that many students come with “baggage” arising from poverty, broken or abusive homes, poor parenting, and other social issues such as peer pressure and drugs, and that the weight of this burden must be at least lightened before any learning can occur. To believe that the profession can only be properly practised with perfect students is a misconception, because it is clear that today’s teachers have to function more like artists or sculptors [being creative enough to make masterpieces out of the raw materials provided] instead of like chefs or bakers [producing gourmet products by applying prescribed recipe-like practices] like those of years ago.

Teachers are being called upon to use all their human skills and to employ all the resources available to them, as they chisel and carve from the raw materials supplied to them to produce the most beautiful products that their students' potential will allow. No longer can teachers assume that students come to them ready, willing, and able to learn mathematics, geography, or science. Teachers are called upon to advise students on effective ways to resolve conflicts, on how to make informed decisions about issues affecting their lives, and on how to go about making choices that will lead to healthy lifestyle practices and social behaviours. In view of this, therefore, teachers are being called upon to be prepared to respond to students' expectations by providing learning environments that are open, accommodating, and, above all, humanistic, if they are to meet the diverse needs of their present clientele.

Our students differ from those of the past in two major respects—their affinity to the modern forms of communication, and mental stress arising from the many challenges of the contemporary social environment. Because of the latter, many of them tend to demonstrate a high dependence on teachers for some degree of comfort, even if they do not admit or are unwilling to articulate this dependence. In the final analysis, however, the onus is really on teachers to identify and provide a sense of comfort for these wanting and willing students, even as they attempt to teach science, mathematics, geography, and so on.

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