

Consciousness-Based Education

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Recently, I was invited to participate in a two-day conference entitled “Adding Consciousness Based Education for Total Brain Development,” hosted by the Trinidad and Tobago arm of the International Meditation Society. Presenters included local educators and researchers as well as international academics in the fields of education, management, criminology, and neurology. Discussions centred largely around the process of education and the role schools (including the responsibilities of teachers and administrators) ought to play in the transformation of society towards developed nation status. The idea of consciousness-based education is an interesting and perhaps timely one, in the context of holistic education and complete human development, given that we are viewed as a global society in which modern education is information based—focusing largely on what is known (facts, procedures, and concepts), but ignoring the knower—the consciousness of the students.

Educators agree that the process of education involves three aspects: the knower, who is the learner/student; the process of knowing, which includes activities such as reading, listening, and experimenting; and the known, which includes curricula and measurement standards such as tests and examinations. Despite our best attempts to understand these three aspects and to facilitate the inputs, outputs, and needs of each in the hope of achieving some measure of congruence and coherence among them, we have at best created a highly certified society but not a truly educated one. In most instances, our education process has attended to the objective aspect of knowledge (what our students study), without systematically developing the subjective basis of knowledge acquisition (the students’ consciousness).

Presenters at the conference suggested that it is this affective domain—inclusive of students’ consciousness, their awareness and their feelings—that determines their degree of creativity, confidence, and motivation, which are all fundamental to the education process. They further suggested that education, as presented to our students today, lacks a way of preparing the knower for maximum learning. The impact and mental influence of realities such as stress, tiredness, peer pressure, academic competitiveness, and teacher absenteeism are not necessarily factored into the learning experience and, as suggested, we understand very little about the effect these realities have on the knower/learner/student.

The consciousness-based education programme aims to improve educational outcomes by developing students’ full inner potential. Its flexibility allows for its easy infusion into any school type with minimal disruption to academic timetabling demands. It involves students’ participation in transcendental meditation for short periods—ten or fifteen minutes—before the formal start of school and at the end of

the school day. At the Ideal Academy Public Charter School in the United States and here in Trinidad at the SWAHA College in Sangre Grande, school administrators and teachers have factored these short periods for transcendental meditation into their timetable for those students who want to be part of the programme. It is open to all students (and teachers) and no one is made to feel compelled to participate.

At the conference, some local students who participated in the programme shared their phenomenological experiences coming out of the programme. They indicated that some of the major benefits to them personally were greater confidence, “increased motivation” to “pursue academic tasks” and “sports,” as well as the development of “greater coping skills,” leading to “reduced levels of stress” and “increased levels of relaxation”. Presenters explained that the programme strengthens the cognitive, physiological, and affective domains of learning, while promoting healthy lifestyle choices and positive behaviour. They suggested that regular practice of the technique has the potential to significantly reduce stress and tension, which many students and teachers experience on a daily basis, and to create a more focused learning environment.

Presenters were also very careful to point out that the transcendental meditation programme is not a religion or a religious practice, and that it requires no change in spiritual lifestyles, habits, or beliefs. They noted that millions of people around the world, of all cultures and backgrounds, have learned and continue to practise meditation as part of their daily routine. The relaxing and soothing benefits of meditation are not something new, and the suggestion that it be infused into the classroom experience is worth consideration, especially now that our students seem to come into our classrooms with social challenges far greater in number and severity than in the past. There is need to awaken sensitivity and compassion within our student population, and to foster harmony and reduce negativity. This approach might just be a good starting point towards this end.

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