Building Bridges Between School and Community
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Over the years, there have been repeated calls by the general public for quality education. The term "quality" is often undefined, but these calls appear to be based on the assumption that students are not being exposed to worthwhile or effective school programmes. In reaction to these opinions and to contemporary views about the educative process, the Ministry of Education has initiated many reforms intended to address the issue of quality, within the framework of the *Education Policy Paper* (1993-2003). This policy states, in part, that every child:

- ♦ has an inherent right to an education which will enhance the development of maximum capability regardless of gender, ethnic, economic, social or religious background

- ♦ has the ability to learn, and that we must build on this positive assumption

- ♦ has an inalienable right to an education which facilitates the achievement of personal goals and the fulfillment of obligations to society.

Among these initiatives were the production of curricula and the removal of corporal punishment. As an example of the former, the National Certificate of Secondary Education (NCSE) curricula of the early to mid-1990s were based in part on Gardner's multiple intelligence theory, and on the desire to standardise operations and certify students at the lower secondary level. The current secondary education reform initiatives continue in a similar vein, under the aegis of the Secondary Education Modernisation Programme (SEMP), with special emphasis on the use of multimedia in teaching. At the primary level, school curricula aim to operationalise "constructivism" as a philosophy of knowledge, with its implications for students' active involvement in their learning.

These new curriculum documents were meant to address issues of quality by reviewing the content to be addressed, and by having teachers broaden their repertoire of teaching behaviours. These curriculum changes were informed by the belief that students would be more actively involved in the learning process by engaging frequently in higher-order thinking, and by increasing levels of peer/peer interaction and teacher/student interaction. The removal of corporal punishment was meant to create a more humane classroom/school environment, free from the negative ethos of physical violence. In sum, the changes were meant to facilitate the creation of a classroom/school climate that provides a psychologically safe environment, which is conducive to the learning process, through appropriate curriculum content, pedagogy, and classroom management strategies.

However, despite these initiatives, the calls for quality education continue apace. It seems that, generally, members of the public are unaware of the initiatives, and teachers informally lament the fact that many of their colleagues are either opposed to the policy changes or do not really change their classroom behaviours. It is clear that changes on

paper do not easily translate into behavioural changes. The usual explanation is that the changes are hindered by the lack of financial resources to support implementation and to monitor their effects. However, there may be more fundamental reasons for the resistance to change.

We are often impatient for change but, ironically, we seem to resist change. Perhaps it is time to come to terms with the idea that there are underlying beliefs, values, and norms held by the general public (including teachers, students, and administrators) that may not be in harmony with those guiding the proposed system-wide changes. These underlying assumptions must be explicitly addressed before there can be meaningful changes within the system. The following are some underlying assumptions/beliefs that may be guiding the expectations of stakeholders, but which appear to be incongruent with the assumptions that underpin the intended changes within the education system:

1. Many adults, now parents, were exposed primarily to the chalk-and-talk method of teaching, and they believe that since they have been successful with this system, their children could be successful as well, aided by numberless hours of drill and practice exercises at school and at home. They therefore expect that this strategy would be evident in the teaching practices to which their children are exposed. Consequently, these parents often complain to administrators and teachers when their children's books are not filled with notes and they do not appear to get sufficient homework. Teachers are then pressured to conform to societal expectations, although many understand that the chalk and talk method presupposes a single intelligence based on logico-mathematical and linguistic strengths. However, the contemporary notion of multiple intelligences posits that this approach disadvantages many students whose dominant intelligences are the musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, spatial, or kinesthetic.

2. As children, many adults were subjected to physical punishment for misbehaviour, both at school and at home. Many say, "I was beaten when I was a child and I'm OK, so it's OK for my children to be beaten. Spare the rod and spoil the child." Such parents commend, and even recommend, teachers who use physical punishment, since they truly believe that this punishment put them on the straight and narrow path and prepared them for a better life. These parents may find it difficult to accept the replacement of corporal punishment by alternative, non-violent forms of behaviour management.

3. Many adults who were unsuccessful within the school system, or who have knowledge of children who have been unsuccessful, do not believe that all children can learn within the formal school environment, as premised in the education policy framework.

How then can we build bridges between these incompatible perspectives? It is highly unlikely that there will be unaided, wholesale conversion from one way of thinking to another. Therefore, it seems that we must address these fundamental beliefs explicitly if the transformational changes are to occur. One possible strategy is a policy of continuous dialogue among all the stakeholders in society that allows for open and critical reflection on, and analysis of, different viewpoints with a view to understanding these positions. To

this end, we can begin the process by engaging in collaborative action research on issues related to the education system, with financial input from the local business community and international sources. Teams of stakeholders—teachers, principals, businessmen, parents, unions, etc. can come together to identify problems, devise interventions, act on these proposed interventions, and gather and analyse data for further action.

Collaboration in determining (a) the problem to investigate, (b) what counts as evidence, (c) how the evidence will be collected, and (d) the form of reporting the results will no doubt facilitate open and meaningful communication, interrogate different perspectives, and enhance understandings that can only be beneficial to all in the long term.

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