

Negotiating Barriers to Learning

Susan Herbert

Part 2

In Part 1, we looked at the barriers to learning that arise principally from students' negative constructions of their efficacy with respect to formal schoolwork. Part 2 looks at barriers to learning from the teacher's perspective—the barriers teachers may construct during the interaction between teacher and pupil.

With consistent incorrect work, teachers' expectations of pupils are reduced and another barrier to learning can be erected. Research has shown that teachers' expectations are highly correlated with students' socio-economic status (SES) and with student performance. Gloria Ladson-Billings' case study report of teachers' actions in an urban classroom in the USA, reveals that teachers' interactions with students ranged from "permissions to fail to demands for success." Evans too has researched this issue and she notes that "teachers have the power of creating the self-fulfilling prophecy—influencing students to think and act in ways which conform with their expectations. They may also affect the students' desire to stay in school or to drop out."

Another example of the impact of teachers' expectations comes from a study by Victoria Purcell-Gates. She conducted a two-year ethnography of a White family from southern Appalachia, USA, comprising a barely literate young boy (Donny) of two barely literate parents. She noted that Donny was written off as a hopeless case as early as second grade. Further she reported that although the mother tried to speak to teachers so that they could help Donny, no notice was taken of Donny's failure to learn. It was the pattern of failure that the teachers expected.

With the onset of Universal Secondary Education (USE), 100% of the student population is eligible for secondary education. With this change, there is much more diversity in the skills and abilities in the classroom or students' learning styles and ways of thinking. Students may enter the secondary school with specific strengths that have not normally been accommodated within the school context, and also with a knowledge base that is unfamiliar to the teacher who emerged from the traditional school setting. In addition, of course, a much wider range of SES is represented. Therefore, teachers face many more challenges to help students to access the formal abstract concepts that are presented in schools, especially those teachers in the newer schools. So, in theory, teachers cannot continue to work as if there has not been a change and to teach perhaps as they have been taught. Teachers are now required to make conscious efforts to dismantle the well-known barriers to learning that have been reported, both formally and informally, based on years of research done within and outside the Caribbean. We may well ask why this has not happened yet, given that many teachers have been trained over the years.

Teachers who have been trained through the Diploma in Education (Dip.Ed.) have been exposed to concepts in Foundation Areas of Education such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, and language; to the skills required for action research; and to the importance

of developing the reflective habit. Furthermore, they are provided with opportunities to develop and use these skills, as they are asked to reflect on various aspects of their practice. However, like their students, the teachers who enter the Dip.Ed. programme are not blank slates. They have constructed notions (expectations) and beliefs about the good teacher, the good school, the good student, and the good curriculum. And some of these conceptions can in fact serve as barriers to learning the concepts and theories to which they are exposed when they engage in training. Research work has also shown that these conceptions are constructed by the interactions among knowledge, attitudes, and context, and they are very difficult to change within a short period of time. Furthermore, the school context/environment and society at large, which contribute to and are also shaped by traditional understandings and attitudes towards school, are not always supportive of change when the teachers return full-time to the classroom after they complete their training. In such circumstances, trained teachers often return to old ways of thinking and doing. It therefore remains a challenge at many levels within the education system in Trinidad and Tobago, as obtains elsewhere, for the trained teachers to, according to Proust, “see through new eyes,” so that they can live up to their responsibility to transform their practice in ways that result in meaningful experiences and learning for all students. Teacher educators, too, must therefore continue to search for ways to negotiate individual and societal barriers to learning.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine