

Dare to Dream?

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Part 2

Teachers do not in general deviate from the aims and objectives of the curriculum document in use, and since most secondary teachers focus on teaching their subject, we can surmise that students at this level are not being deliberately taught to dream. I remember when as a young teacher the following question was posed to me: Are you teaching chemistry [the subject] or are you teaching children? Upon reflection, I realised that the answer can serve to explain whether teachers depart from the “syllabus” or textbook, when required. If, as teachers, our primary focus is the subject, then the goal is to “cover the syllabus,” and in many instances we move from topic to topic whether the children understand or not. If, however, our focus is primarily on the children, then we will seek to identify students’ strengths and weaknesses and use this knowledge to plan our lessons, as well as to recognise where the curriculum is deficient and act accordingly.

Curriculum theorists state that the inputs into planning for teaching include knowledge of the subject matter; the learner; aims, goals, and objectives; and the society. If we focus on the learner as the starting point, we may have to deviate from the syllabus to facilitate student learning and to develop appropriate goals, aims, and objectives. These may include student outcomes related to developing a “big idea” that defines a life purpose, in a manner similar to the activity undertaken by organizations/schools in developing vision and mission statements.

But most teachers would say that there is no time for such pursuits. Many teachers feel compelled to cover the syllabus even when they know that the students do not understand much of what has been taught. They often state that they must prepare the students for the final examination. They complain, perhaps legitimately, that there is too much content and not enough time, so they must proceed at their predetermined pace, sometimes adopting inappropriate strategies. As a result, some students inevitably fall behind, and, consequently, fail their examinations. With the demotivation that often accompanies repeated failure and without the passport for entry to further study, some students abandon their dreams of becoming doctors, engineers, and so on.

Unfortunately for some students, the negative experiences associated with school-based interactions are not restricted to the academic sphere. Anecdotal stories from some famous and successful artistes, for example, the American singer, Brandy, and also from some athletes, tell of their experiences with individual teachers, perhaps well-intentioned, who attempted to convince them that their dreams, in spheres that are not considered “academic,” were unattainable. We also know of parents and other adults who, in their attempts to have their children face what they deem “the realities of life,” are also harsh on/ impatient with dreams. Do students dare to dream in this context? Do students dream in the absence of positive experiences?

David Rudder expresses a similar concern about the present generation of Caribbean children who have not experienced the glories of the victories of the West Indies cricket team: “What is it about this new generation/Who has never seen the West

Indians rule/And every loss is a daggered reflection/Through the heart of our blue Caribbean pool.”

But perhaps all is not lost. Psychologists remind us that persons can emerge triumphant in the midst of extremely challenging circumstances. Rudder, too, gives us hope that some children will work to fulfil their dreams of success in spite of the obstacles placed in their path, including perhaps the flaws within and outside the formal education system. He sings: “But something I saw that day in Antigua/Australian power was strangely on the run/It was a glimpse of the old rebel I know so well/I saw it in the eyes, I saw it in the eyes, saw it in the eyes/Of Bankie’s son.”

Barack Obama has publicly shared his “Dreams from my Father” and “The Audacity of Hope.” Perhaps, then, we can imagine the consequences if there were support for students when they are brave enough to articulate their dreams, and if there were deliberate attempts to encourage dreams. Such tangible support might include a commitment to the search for solutions to overcome contemporary obstacles, which we have created; the obstacles that might prevent some students who are interested in pursuing specific careers but whose qualifications and/or performance do not meet our pre-established standards for further study. We may find that the result is more of the very scientists, technologists, engineers, and entrepreneurs that we lament are in short supply.

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