

Business in Education

Steven Khan

Educational systems at all levels are oriented by a scientifically minded business ethos and ideology. This is incorporated in a desire for, and practices of, technological solutions, managerial accountability, standardised assessment, and hyper-competition, which generate a consistent and reliable *product* efficiently and economically. In *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*, published in 1962, Raymond E. Callahan, presented an in-depth social-historical analysis of the personalities and sociocultural forces that influenced the actions of educational administrators in the first three decades of the 20th century, and through which business values, practices, and ideology had come to influence, if not dominate, the culture of educational administrators and schools. His analysis has a lot to offer us in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean, especially with respect to the importance of understanding and beginning to interrogate the originating philosophies of many of our educational practices that have become ossified in the language of inviolable, if not idolatrous, tradition.

Beginning in 1900, he argues that the visible successes of science, business, and industry in the 19th century gave them a position of ideological prestige and influence in the American psyche. This manifested in demands for more utilitarian, vocational, or practical curricula within a changing national context of mass immigration, semi-literacy, cultural diversity, poverty, inflation, and suspicion of inefficient institutions, and created conditions for the emergence of *efficiency experts* who successfully advocated the application of business methods in education. These included Ayres' "Index of Efficiency," Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management*, and Bobbitt's application of Taylor's principles to determining standards, which, by reducing the complexity of education and administration to concerns primarily with financial and mechanical mensuration, found fecund followers.

From these ideas about economy and efficiency flowed *rational* and *justifiable* decisions to increase class size or the number of classes taught by a teacher, reduce salaries, narrow or eliminate *inefficient* curricula, and remove *unproductive* "laggards" from the schools. In the next two decades, these ideas would be elaborated in attempts to *maximise* the use of the school plant by shuffling students among rooms and so reduce the *unit cost* of education, and to develop systems of educational accounting that made simple acts stiflingly complicated and ushered in a bureaucratic hegemony that weakened the bonds of trust among teachers, administrators, and clerks. Finally, in the period following WWI, marketing and the science of propaganda's potential for shaping and directing public perception of business and creating "good will" would give rise to the *public relations expert*, who, like his efficiency expert counterpart of the earlier era, would bring fresh ideas and insight gleaned from business and industry into the educational realm and cement the standardisation of the operation of schools as a "businesslike organization."

In trying to understand what he perceived as the unexpected capitulation of educational administrators to public criticism and the demand for business-like success and industrial efficiency, Callahan proposed what is now referred to as *the vulnerability thesis*. He argued that because of the way their school systems were financed and organised, those responsible for educational administration perennially found their security of tenure vulnerable to public

criticism and subsequent dismissal. This corporeal fear of dismissal, he argued, often resulted in their abdicating their leadership responsibilities by yielding to the external demands for the application of business methods in education, with neither sufficient nor appropriate considerations as to whether such methods were suited to educational goals beyond efficiency, standardization, and accountability. Similarly, he showed that teachers' instructional focus over the same period had shifted to student/class management, as they had come to adopt and implement some of the business strategies in their classrooms in order to please their administrators and their school boards, which had become dominated by businessmen.

To reduce the vulnerability of educators, Callahan concluded that the organisation and financing of school systems would have to be changed, that the quality of the preparation of educational leaders in universities would have to be improved, and that both of these would have to occur more or less concurrently. These would help to counter the tragedy of *modern* education in which "educational questions were subordinated to business considerations; ... administrators were produced who were not, in any true sense, educators; ...a scientific label was put on some very unscientific and dubious methods and practices and ...an anti-intellectual climate, already prevalent was strengthened..." which resulted in education being practiced in a "businesslike, mechanical, organizational way." Very little has changed and the situation will continue to worsen until we review this ideology of "business" *in* education and make education/evocation a human(e) business.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine