

Vision 2020 and Education

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On November 15, 2002, Prime Minister Patrick Manning launched Vision 2020 at the Trinidad Hilton Hotel, which revealed the government's commitment to transform Trinidad and Tobago into a developed society by the year 2020.

Several individuals and groups have disagreed with the Prime Minister's perception of Vision 2020. They suggest that it is only an illusion to be pursued—a vision that will never be realised in this lifetime, because our education system and social infrastructure lack the transformational power to achieve it.

To some extent these individuals may be correct. However, history has demonstrated repeatedly that one man's dreams can transform an entire nation—if not the world. Therefore nothing is inherently wrong with the Prime Minister's vision for developed country status for Trinidad and Tobago. What may be wrong is his assessment of our capacity to transform ourselves from our present condition to that envisaged by Vision 2020.

A quick look at our history will reveal that from 1960 onwards Trinidad and Tobago has experienced a proliferation of educational expansion—mainly in the form of new school buildings and access to increased school places. Indeed, by the late 1970s we were the envy of the Caribbean with our impressive school structures. Unfortunately, by the 1980s, many of these structures proved to be no more than concrete jungles for failing students. As a result, our society is now faced with dysfunctional social products of every kind.

There are many among us who believe that only a new ideology can help to move us to a new way of life—a way of life that will promote in the society greater concern and respect for fellow citizens, critical thinking, enhanced worker productivity, and a sense of confidence in meeting the changes of the future.

For such an ideology to take root, our education system must undergo radical changes. We cannot continue the way we have been going. Most importantly, we have to revisit the Education Act and the Public Service regulations. While they may have been very relevant in the past, it is now clear that they cannot work as successfully in the present age. We are dealing with a different type of teacher, student, and new circumstances. We therefore need a new legal framework and a social contract that can help us respond to the imperatives of the 21st century.

Also, we have to cultivate in our teachers a greater sense of the three levels of commitment—commitment to the education system and school, commitment to student learning, and commitment to professional development. These three combined, in my view, can contribute considerably to the success of educational reform in our society.

All the evidence at hand suggests that we may not be moving along the right path as far as programmes and curricula in our schools go. My view is that we should revisit our approach to curriculum, teacher training, and the appointment of principals in our schools.

Until we address our approach to schooling in the society, Vision 2020 will remain an illusion. We need an education system that addresses the needs of students, parents and, indeed, the whole society. We need an education system that will help us with our work ethic, sense of nationalism, and respect for each other. Above all, we need an education system that will cultivate in our hearts a fear of God, a passion for ethical behaviour, total quality, and a sense of purposefulness in our everyday lives.

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