

Rethinking Nation Building

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Trinidad and Tobago is currently faced with complex and multiple problems. Unfortunately, we created them through complacency and reluctance to establish an education system designed to generate innovation, inquisitiveness, and a propensity for change.

For whatever reasons, we in Trinidad and Tobago seem to believe that things in life will always work out for the best; that we do not necessarily have to take steps for things to happen. If we want cars, food, fine clothes, even cell phones, this is not a problem, since we can import. Few of us stop to consider that population growth can overwhelm supply; that the Malthusian population theory has re-emerged to haunt us.

If ever there was a time for a nation to reconsider its direction, that time has long passed for Trinidad and Tobago. Through our education system, we now have to desperately try to play “catch up” if we are to set things right. Some scholars argue that the success or failure of nations sometimes begins one hundred years before. If we accept this perspective, then we in Trinidad and Tobago are simply reaping what we have sown in the past. To my mind, our problems are the result of our failure to develop a constructive national ideology and a dynamic education system manned by people who refuse to engage only in system maintenance but, instead, are concerned with responding to the imperatives of the times.

We have to learn from the mistakes of the past. We have to understand that education systems represent the lifeblood of societies throughout the world. As a result, our educational planners have to be guided by a constructive ideology based on three essential components for educational excellence—relevance, effectiveness, and efficiency. They must also understand the true purpose of education in societies, which is not about certification only.

According to the American scholar Shirley McCune, the basic function of schools in any society is to socialize and prepare children and youth with the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviours that they will need to fulfil their individual and societal roles as adults. Schools must do this by carrying out two paradoxical functions. On the one hand, they must transmit and conserve the knowledge developed in the past. On the other hand, they must anticipate the future and the knowledge, skills, and behaviours that youth will need when they assume adult roles. Indeed, this is a formidable task for the planners, administrators, and teachers in our system, but the job has to be done. Clearly, it cannot be easy.

Unless we understand and appreciate that we cannot successfully manage an educational system without understanding the transformations taking place in society and the world, it will be futile to attempt to inject meaningful change into the education system or even the school. According to internationally recognized education consultant Dee Dickinson, five societal transformations help to create pressures for change and can shape the

necessary directions for educational restructuring—economic, social demographic, organizational, educational, and individual. In other words, we cannot run an education system without taking into account the economic implications, population trends, the nature and dynamics of our schools, the types of curricula that have become necessary, and the type of personnel we recruit and retain in our schools.

In addition, we need to formulate and apply goals, and specific types of values and norms in our educational agencies and schools. It is important that we realise that the goals, values, and norms have changed over the ages. Therefore, it is naïve to apply industrial age goals, values, and norms in our present information age. Any attempt to do so will only derail our thrust towards effective schooling.

Our concepts of learning must also change. We have to abandon the belief that indoctrination or enticing students to pass examinations is the vehicle for learning in schools. Instead, we should embrace the belief that three phases characterise learning—exploring for knowledge, understanding knowledge, and acting on or using acquired knowledge.

There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that we have to restructure our schools. This can be done by bringing the community to the school; restructuring the bureaucracy (or the manner in which the Ministry of Education has organized its central office, educational districts, and schools); and redesigning students' educational experiences.

Clearly, we cannot ignore the need for change and transformation. Change must occur if schools are to fulfil their contract with society to prepare children and youth for a future and rapidly changing world.

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