

## **New Imperative for Schooling**

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The world is no longer what it used to be. Sociologists tell us that, in comparison with past eras, we now have changed cultures and secular values, and are faced with new social imperatives. Alvin Toffler, in his book, *Creating a New Civilization*, states that even our major institutions have undergone changes.

Clearly, if we accept these views, we will have to recognise and accept that approaches to schooling in the world, in general, and our nation, in particular, will require reform. Areas for such changes will include how we recruit, select, and develop our school leaders, teachers, and other relevant staff, and, more importantly, how we interact with our students today. In the past, our approaches were based on symbols of authority and on ideologies of authoritarianism. Unfortunately, both authority and authoritarianism in today's world seem to have been devalued. Indeed, one wonders at the extent to which our modern youth have lost their respect for institutions and their elders.

Because we are now in the information age, schools are confronted with a number of significant and complex issues: 1) our school populations have diversified (in quality, class, religion, gender, and ethnicity) considerably since Independence; 2) a new category of students, labelled as "at risk," has invaded our schools because of the expansion of education in Trinidad and Tobago since the early 1950s; 3) we now have to move away from a perspective in education that emphasises mainly certification to one that includes helping children to become responsible and productive citizens; 4) the new imperatives of our evolving society demand the retraining of teachers and the provision of assistance in the use of new methods of schooling, pedagogy, and classroom management; and 5) worldwide forces, including the Geneva-based *Global Initiative to End all Corporal Punishment of Children* (launched in April 2001), have been increasingly committing themselves to the view that the world should now be more concerned with promoting and sustaining humanistic climates in schools, homes, and even prisons.

Against these developments in education over the past five decades, I find it necessary to contribute to the discussion on what is popularly described as the "at risk" student. Many definitions are available for describing this category of student. For example, the *Wikipedia* encyclopedia describes "at risk" students as students who are in danger of failing academically for one or several reasons—membership of ethnic minorities, being academically disadvantaged, being disabled, having low socio-economic status, and being probationary students.

Educational consultant Judson Hixson believes that students are "at risk" when they have experienced a significant mismatch between their circumstances and needs in terms of the capacity or willingness of their schools to accept, accommodate, and respond to them in a manner that supports and enables their maximum social, emotional, and intellectual growth and development.

Knowledgeable educators accept students as being “at risk” when they exhibit poor academic and social skills that help to promote a general disconnection with the school culture or when they can be associated with alienation from school, low self-esteem, the acceptance of failure as a common experience because of the lack of positive adult role models, perpetrated school violence, and planned disruption in the classroom.

It should be noted that not all “at risk” students fall in the 0–30% range highlighted in our national SEA results. The research literature indicates that a significant number of “at risk” students have been identified as gifted, but, frequently, and perhaps what may be worse, these gifted “at risk” students go unrecognized in our schools and consequently are inappropriately or inadequately served and unfairly labelled as problem students.

Finally, I wish to submit that student performance in our schools could be considerably enhanced if, as a nation, we accept that the world has changed and that as a result we must allocate personnel to our schools who have the necessary philosophical base, empathy, expertise, and understanding of this “new world.” Indeed, as we look at problems emerging from our schools, we must accept general findings from the research literature which emphasise that students become “at risk” because: 1) of how school personnel interact with them; 2) schools do not build on student strengths (i.e., their knowledge, experiences, skills, talents, interests, etc.), but instead tend to focus on remediating real or presumed deficiencies; and 3) schools do not recognise that the quality of school experiences to which students are exposed, rather than their characteristics, will determine their success or failure.

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