

Empowering Our Primary Schools

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Ken Kay, President of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills in the USA, believes that, today, ambitious individuals need more than content mastery to successfully climb the economic ladder. For him, aspiring candidates in the job market need to demonstrate their ability to think critically, solve problems, communicate, collaborate, use technology, and be globally competent.

In Trinidad and Tobago, unfortunately, content mastery at the secondary and tertiary levels seems to represent the ticket to success. Little thought appears to be given to how important our primary education system is for providing the necessary foundations for effective secondary and tertiary education.

For at least two centuries, we in Trinidad and Tobago have been struggling to promote and sustain meaningful primary education for our citizens. In spite of all our well-intentioned plans and efforts, I do not believe that our primary education system has been responding to our needs as a nation. Yes, I agree that this system has produced scholars and world-recognised achievers. However, it has catered primarily for the cream of the crop, or our brightest students, and not for the majority.

We live in an age that seriously challenges elitism in all forms. Further, as Ken Kay has highlighted, new demands have emerged in the workplace and in society. There must now be paradigm shifts in terms of school plants and facilities, policies, structures, resources, and practices. Researchers and writers on schooling now see school effectiveness through different lenses, and believe that education must now be conducted intensively on three platforms—the cognitive, the affective, and the psychomotor. Emphasis must be directed to creating a total individual—one who can use his mental faculties, who can analyse and solve problems easily, and, above all, who is capable of coping with rapid change.

The question to be asked is to what extent can primary schools in Trinidad and Tobago establish the necessary foundation to create this type of individual? On looking at the physical structure of many of these schools, we see dilapidated, age-battered, ill-suited buildings for the type of curriculum required to deliver the values, attitudes, skills, competencies, and experiences required by students who are destined to cope with the demands and forces of a harshly competitive and rapidly changing world.

Resources, policies, and structures continue to be frozen in 19th and 20th century practices. Even our current SEA examination is still oriented to rote and heavy memory skills. No attempt has been made to generate tests that can help students to develop a propensity for creativity, innovation, and patriotism; and to appreciate their culture and environment, their history, and their fellow citizens.

Our teachers attend training institutions that encounter much resistance in promoting the outcomes of new paradigms for training and development in our schools. When reform

initiatives are undertaken, teachers who have been trained and developed in the old paradigms experience great difficulty in implementing them.

Against this background, it is my belief that our system of primary education is totally inadequate for providing the foundation for the seamless education system that the Ministry of Education has been proposing. To my mind, the time is long overdue for creating a system that can help us to prepare our young people to be equipped and empowered to respond to the imperatives of the 21st century.

While I admit that I do not have all the answers, I still feel competent to make a few suggestions. First, we have to go back to the drawing board where primary education in Trinidad and Tobago is concerned. We have to start by asking the following questions: 1) What kind of curriculum is best suited for our primary school children in this information and communication age? 2) Will our present physical plants be adequate for delivering the new curriculum? 3) What policies and structures will we be prepared to put in place to effectively support curriculum delivery in our primary schools? 4) What steps will we take to ensure effective plant maintenance? and 5) Can our teacher preparation institutions produce the new type of teachers and leaders our new curriculum will require or do they require reform?

For too long we have been focusing on secondary and tertiary education to the detriment of our primary education system. The available evidence confirms that all is not well in Trinidad and Tobago. Only a few of our young people are making it up the ladder—and even they leave much to be desired. We must begin primary education reform now.

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