

Charting a new course for education in Anguilla: the Teacher Gloria Omololu Institute

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INTRODUCTION

In 1998 I was invited to Atlanta, Georgia, by a relative to attend a personal development workshop. The workshop was focused on helping participants to see 'life as possibility', the view being that we have many limiting beliefs about who we are and who we could be. These beliefs prevent us from exploring the possibilities in our life and, as a result, we become less than we could be. Consequently, as one of the final activities of that workshop each participant had to declare herself or himself as a possibility:

I am the possibility of universal transformation through spiritual leadership in a world manifesting the beauty and the glory of the Creator!

It was this assurance of universal transformation, although not verbalized until I formulated my vision statement in 1998, that had unconsciously infused me with the determination to chart a new course for education in Anguilla and develop the Teacher Gloria Omololu Institute some four years earlier. This philosophy also kept me motivated to persevere in the face of the many challenges and hardships and the skepticism of many who fear anything new. There were, at that time, no other private primary schools in Anguilla. I was convinced that a more child-centred approach to education, which was based on psychological principles, could make a difference in the lives of the children of Anguilla and, by extension, in the lives of the people of the nation and the world.

My training, my experience, and all the research findings I had access to, had led to my firm belief that when children develop a strong positive sense of themselves, their entire outlook on the world, on others in their world and on their potential for success, is positively affected. I further believe that these children will exert positive influences on others, including the adults in their lives. Thus, changing the world in which they live in essence, they transform their world.

This conviction has been substantiated by the extraordinary success of the institute after just seven years. The children of the institute are creative, expressive, inquisitive, highly motivated, self-confident and affectionate. They excel, not only academically, but in many other

areas of their lives. I see the Teacher Gloria Omololu Institute as the epitome of all my human resource endeavours.

The institute was established on 3 September 1994 as a private-assisted government school, to provide an alternative to the government's primary school system. It was introduced at a time when several challenges in the education system were made evident by an escalation of behavioural and emotional problems in the school as well as in the wider society. Children were exhibiting signs of alienation and lack of identity. As the founder, I sought to provide an alternative system based on the empowerment and valuing of children which would enhance their self-esteem and lead to higher levels of academic achievement and social adjustment. As a consequence they would become more productive citizens of Anguilla in particular, and of the world at large. In essence, they would be educated for life.

The Omololu Educational Institute Incorporated, a non-profit organization with a board of ten directors, operates the Teacher Gloria Omololu Institute. The institute has been named after my sister, Gloria Cassandra Banks Harrigan, who epitomized the characteristics of a model teacher. Teacher Gloria's life on earth came to an end through a tragic accident in 1987.

Omololu is a Yoruba name from West Africa which means 'children are the summit of achievement'. The word 'institute' has been used to embrace the total concept of education for life, as the school plans to ultimately provide educational opportunities to people at all stages of development.

The institute, which commenced its operations with two pre-school classes and one primary class and an enrolment of forty-five students, is now into its seventh year with an enrolment of just over 150 students. An additional class was added each year until, in September 2000, the institute achieved the landmark status of a full primary school with seven primary classes. In September 2001, the first primary school graduates will be ready for secondary school. Parents are lobbying for the introduction of the institute's own secondary school. If this is not viable, students will attend the island's only secondary school.

The curriculum of the institute is directed towards the holistic development of the child through a sound core

curriculum, multicultural education (including our cultural history as African Caribbean people), foreign languages, and the creative and performing arts, all in a safe, nurturing and stimulating environment. Parental and community involvement are critical components of the institute's operations at all levels.

OBJECTIVE OF THE INSTITUTE (PHASE ONE)

To provide the residents of Anguilla with an alternative form of primary and pre-school education for their children and to help them accept ownership of the system through parental involvement.

Aims

1. To provide pupils with instruction that is designed to meet their individual developmental needs and provide them with a sound educational foundation.
2. To provide opportunities for pupils to achieve multilingual competence (i.e. Spanish, French) by exposure to these languages from early in their school careers.
3. To provide students with information on; (a) their heritage—to help foster a sense of identity and; (b) other cultures—to foster the development of greater tolerance and understanding of the uniqueness and worth of each human being.
4. To provide for the development of expressive and creative skills and for involvement in the performing arts and other non-traditional forms of education.
5. To involve parents and the wider community in the educational process.
6. To develop gender sensitivity at an early age, thereby promoting better interpersonal relationships between the genders.
7. To foster an appreciation of and caring for the environment.
8. To provide an alternative system of private primary education that is affordable and therefore inclusive rather than elitist.
9. To educate children in an atmosphere that is safe, nurturing and stimulating.
10. To ensure that qualified, committed personnel are recruited to implement the philosophy of the institute.
11. To provide a holistic approach to education.
12. To help children develop healthy self-concepts and positive attitudes so that they can commit to excellence and maximize their potential.

CRITICAL COMPONENTS OF THE PROGRAMME

Solid core curriculum

The basic curriculum has been drawn from existing models with additions and modifications. A thematic approach, which integrates the various subject areas, is used. The Anguilla primary school curriculum forms the core of the institute's educational programme. However,

this has been supplemented by many critical components as identified earlier. The result is a holistic curriculum which teaches children to strive for excellence as they live together harmoniously with themselves, with others, and with the environment. This outcome is achieved through a variety of innovative techniques, focused interventions and the infusion of psychological principles into the regular classroom activities.

Multilingual competence

As international borders collapse and nations become more dependent on each other for survival, communication between people becomes more essential. Language barriers stultify communication and understanding. In preparing our children for meaningful involvement in the twenty-first century, multilingual competence is therefore vital.

As the Anguillan society continues to grow and change, we find that the development of a Spanish-speaking population has become a part of our reality. This population, which is largely comprised of descendants of Anguillans living in Santo Domingo, is here to stay and will only grow in the future with the inevitable return of Anguillans of Cuban descent. The realization of this situation led to the start of a Saturday morning Spanish educational programme in 1992, open to all children. A community French education programme began in 1997. Headstart classes for students entering secondary school have also been held during the summer.

Research on the acquisition of a second language has shown that mastery is more easily achieved when children are exposed to the foreign language at an early age. However, presently foreign languages are taught only at the secondary school level in Anguilla. At the Teacher Gloria Omololu Institute, the Spanish language is introduced at the preschool level (three-year-olds) and the French language is started by grade four.

Multicultural education

Children and teachers at the institute also come from many different cultures. Educational institutions around the world have acknowledged the critical importance of multicultural education in a holistic educational programme. At the Teacher Gloria Omololu Institute, this education is infused throughout the regular curriculum and special themes related to multicultural awareness are also developed. In fostering a greater sense of identity and positive self-esteem, our history, as Caribbean peoples predominantly of African descent, is revisited and the more positive elements of those cultures are emphasized.

For peaceful coexistence on this planet, a knowledge and appreciation of other cultures is important. Children learn prejudices from the world around them. Ongoing exposure to other cultures can help to increase tolerance and goodwill as children learn to acknowledge and appreciate the differences in people that create our interesting world. This also enriches the educational experience.

The multicultural programme at the institute involves parents, teachers, children and the wider community sharing their cultures, often using art displays, pictures, artifacts, visits (e.g. art galleries with exhibits or artists demonstrating their work from other countries, visit to the island's mosque), songs, dances, drama and discussions. Children share in and/or learn about many cross-cultural and national celebrations—e.g. Canada Day, Jamaica Independence Day, African Liberation Day, Guyana Independence Day, Black History month, Martin Luther King's birthday, Anguilla Day, Kwanzaa celebrations, etc.

A programme twinning each class with a different country around the world is about to be launched. This programme involves exchange visits, letter writing and cultural exchanges. Classes will spend an entire year being totally immersed in another culture.

Creative and expressive skill development

Children enter the school system with a natural curiosity, a live imagination and an eager and expressive mind. However, by the time they leave our schools, they seem to have lost these characteristics. Another speaker at this seminar, Erik Prinds, said that they 'enter as question marks and leave as semi colons'. I have heard a similar quotation that affirms that they leave as full stops. Our education systems are stifling the very qualities that we recognize as integral to true education. At the Teacher Gloria Omololu Institute there is a systematic programme for the development of the child's creative and expressive skills. This programme includes providing opportunities for children to create and express themselves through art, dance, music, drama, storytelling, poetry, writing and the use of their imagination through other non-traditional, cultural forms.

Although uniforms are used to minimize the visible signs of the different socio-economic levels of students, these have been made in different colors and designs to support individual expression. Children can wear any colour on any day, so on every day our classrooms and playgrounds are beautiful gardens of flowers. Children can express their creativity and individuality as they choose the colour and combination for each day. The mountain motif reminds children to always reach for their own mountain tops.

Parental and community involvement

Parental involvement is very important to the success of education. If the child is aware that the home and the school are working together on his/her behalf, then he/she is motivated to do his or her best.

During admission interviews, parents are advised that their application can only be considered if they make a verbal and written commitment to being totally involved in their child's education. This includes attending parent/teacher (PTA) meetings, monitoring their child's progress, assisting with homework, and sharing their skills, expertise and knowledge with the institute. A

record is kept of attendance at PTA meetings, and of general parent participation in the institute. A parent assessment category is included in children's report cards.

The institute aims at providing opportunities for parental development through workshops for parents and the community. Foreign-language classes have also been conducted for them.

Parents have been willing to share their expertise. Assistance so far has been in many areas, including art lessons, Spanish classes, storytelling, drama, painting of school furniture, cleaning and setting up the playground, swimming lessons, physical education, substitute teaching, supplies, fund-raising and other general assistance. Parents have also been involved in the multicultural education programme.

Community interest in the institute has resulted in donations of money, equipment, tuition assistance, time, and other forms of general support. The institute continues to solicit this type of support.

Positive gender relations

There is heightened awareness today of the need to foster better relations between the genders. Unfortunately, much of the material (nursery rhymes, stories, books, videos) prepared for children, reinforces negative attitudes in this regard. There is also a noticeable absence of males in early childhood education classrooms. The institute endeavours to promote healthy gender relations, positive role models of both genders, respect for all, and also aims at minimizing the impact of stereotyping.

Environmental awareness

The importance of caring for our environment should be emphasized from an early age. Children at the institute are provided with opportunities to discuss, learn about and care for their environment. This information is infused through the general curriculum and is covered through related themes. An example of the infusion is through discussion of the natural fibres (cotton) and the natural dyes used in the production of the uniforms worn by the children. The historical link with cotton is also demonstrated as cotton was actually cultivated on Anguilla up to the late 1960s. The institute has also been used for a pilot programme by the Anguilla National Trust. Children are involved in ongoing ecological activities.

An affordable and inclusive system

The Teacher Gloria Omololu Institute is open to all residents of Anguilla who have a genuine interest in this alternative to the regular education system. Parents' interest and involvement do not necessarily coincide with their economic status. Consequently, tuition is being kept at an affordable rate. The institute has also been successful in soliciting tuition assistance from the local commercial sector for parents experiencing financial problems. As a result of this inclusive policy, the student population represents a wide cross-section of the

Anguillian community, unlike that normally found in private schools.

A safe, nurturing and stimulating environment

Children learn best in an atmosphere in which they feel cared for and valued. A bright stimulating environment is another important factor in the education process. Children are supervised from the time they enter school until they leave. This includes early morning supervision, playground supervision, lunch-hour supervision and after-school supervision. Some parents volunteer to assist.

The school provides a nutritious cooked meal for students whose parents wish them to partake of it. Children are provided with opportunities to learn acceptable table manners—derived from discussions with them. A programme of rotating lunch servers (waiters/waitresses) allows all children to learn how to appreciate and give good service.

Many children live in homes where they do not receive positive nurturing and acceptance. It is a well-documented fact that a positive self-concept can only be developed when a child feels accepted, approved of and appreciated. This positive sense of self is associated with healthy adjustment, positive interpersonal relations and success in life. The Teacher Gloria Omololu Institute is committed to providing the type of environment in which children will realize their maximum potential.

Qualified committed teaching staff

One looks with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings. The curriculum is so much necessary new material, but the warmth is the vital element for the growing child and for the soul of the child—Carl Jung.

The quality and commitment of teachers in the education system is a major determinant of its success. Teachers at the Teacher Gloria Omololu Institute are carefully screened and recruited. It is imperative that they believe in the philosophy of the institute and are committed to working as a team to ensure that students receive the best educational opportunities. Our teachers are sensitive, caring, love children and must be willing to go ‘the extra mile’. These include teachers voluntarily holding after-school classes and Saturday morning classes and even assisting with the preparation of the lunch programme when they perceive a need.

Teachers’ academic and professional qualifications, as well as their experience, are carefully assessed. They all bring a variety of specialist skills which they use for the benefit of the institute. They also receive intentional nurturing during staff development sessions and staff meetings and spontaneous nurturing from both the children and other staff.

The recruitment of male teachers is a present day challenge for early childhood education. The institute has been successful in recruiting one male teacher, who

actually holds a Master’s degree. Male volunteers, usually parents, also offer assistance in physical education and other programmes.

Dr Clarke’s (see List of participants) admonition that nothing never happens reminds me of an old Chinese proverb which affirms that: A child’s life is like a piece of paper on which every passerby leaves a mark. It is important that those who are poised to make several marks on our children’s papers are themselves well-adjusted. Dr Wiltshire (see List of participants) has reminded us that it is only when people have positive feelings about themselves that they can project positive feelings to others.

Holistic approach

The educational programme of the Teacher Gloria Omololu Institute fosters holistic development on several different levels—moral, spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional, and psychosocial. This should prepare children to face the challenges ahead with the confidence of their ability to succeed, which is fueled by a positive sense of self. Our children are marvels of God’s creation and we must always be reminded of this. Bernie Siegel reminds us: *Please continue to look at your children as your valuable treasures. Honour them and yourself.*

Positive self-esteem and commitment to success

The theoretical underpinnings of the school’s philosophy are that an individual must be intrinsically motivated to succeed. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs sheds some insight on the internal forces that hinder or enhance that process. According to Maslow, the satisfaction of the individual’s needs for love and belonging allows him/her to move on to satisfy other needs.

At the Teacher Gloria Omololu Institute, an atmosphere is created which enables the child to feel accepted and appreciated. The intrinsic value, worth and dignity of every human being is emphasized, and behaviours, rather than individuals, are labeled. In fact, a literal interpretation of *omololu* is ‘children of God’. Children at the institute are therefore nurtured as miracles of God’s creation and supreme gifts to humankind. They are constantly reminded, by word and action, that they are special and unique, and positive reinforcers are used for acceptable behaviour. Children are also encouraged to mentor each other informally and through a programme of volunteer peer helpers. The Omololu Super Child of the Week programme provides opportunities for each child to receive positive acknowledgement and appreciation from his/her classmates every week. The Omololu Super Child is applauded by the entire school during the weekly Omololu Time programme. The ‘super child’ also receives a certificate listing the attributes about which her/his classmates are commending her/him, after they have read them to the entire school.

Omololu Time

Omololu Time is a special weekly programme during

which the school is brought together (pre-school and kindergarten form one group, and Grades 1 through 6 form the other group) for a highly interactive session. Many themes related to values, love and respect for self, for others and for our world are discussed. This session is facilitated in a manner that allows for full participation and respectful sharing of experiences and insights from students and teachers. The aim is to help children internalize the values, morals and attitudes which would contribute to their healthy adjustment as citizens of Anguilla and the wider world community. Different classes usually conduct the assembly time which immediately precedes Omololu Time. They use many creative expressions including song, dance, poetry readings and plays to highlight an important value, concept or message that they want to share with the school.

Discussions during Omololu Time might focus on:

- Principles of living together harmoniously, e.g. children might be asked to recount (or teachers asked to suggest) if they are facing relationship challenges. The other children will then propose ways in which they will try to help them. Reports of improvement will be made in subsequent sessions;
- Multi-cultural exchanges;
- Environmental issues, e.g. global warming and our responsibility to care for the world;
- Ways of helping others who are upset (e.g. children who are grieving);
- New students are welcomed, school rules shared and children propose ways in which they will help to make the new children feel welcome;
- Acknowledgement and celebration of our successes—children, teachers and parents are applauded for successes and ways in which they have helped others;
- ‘Attitude of Gratitude’ programme—saying thanks to others.

Omololu Time is designed to be a period when childrens’ self-esteems are enhanced, and they are encouraged to be their best and strive for excellence as they pursue their goals. They are reminded of the motto ‘Omololu’, and to reach for their summit.

The school’s logo, which is a mountain with the sun rising behind, it is the motif pattern on the school’s uniform. This is meant to be a constant reminder that with each new day we can continue our ascent to the summit of our achievement.

Conflict resolution

Children are taught constructive ways of resolving conflicts which result in ‘win-win’ situations. They are invited to talk about the challenge, how they have dealt with it, and how they could have dealt with it differently so that it would not have escalated. Apologies are exchanged, as well as commitments to do things differently. They are then asked to talk about things they appreciate about each other. This is easier or more difficult depending on the emotions involved, but usually children are able to walk away after having embraced

each other, feeling better about the relationship. The resolution sometimes involves negotiation, compromise, or further individual, class or family consultations. We have noted remarkable changes in the behaviour of children who had been taught to ‘defend’ themselves, either in the home or at school.

CONCLUSION

If you treat an individual [...] as if he were what he ought to be and could be, he will become what he ought to be and could be—Goethe

Testimonials from countless students through the ages have acknowledged the impact of a particular teacher or teachers on the lives of children. I can still hear the echo of the words ‘Linda Banks, you can do it’ from my English teacher when I was uncertain about my ability to perform a certain task. In fact, I went back to her several years later when I was in graduate school and told her of the lasting impact of those five words. When one teacher questioned his student about his tremendous success one year following a year in which he had failed miserably, the student simply said ‘I like myself when I am with you’. I can still remember how honoured I felt when a friend from Trinidad came to the phone to receive my call and said that her daughter, who could not remember my name, described me as ‘the lady who makes me feel good about myself’.

The children of the Teacher Gloria Omololu Institute have demonstrated to me beyond the shadow of a doubt the truth behind Goethe’s statement cited above. They surprise their teachers with parties, gifts and other demonstrations of appreciation, and show empathy when others are hurting. During Omololu Time they might spontaneously invite the school to applaud a teacher, another child, or a parent. They have written inviting parents to send their children to our school. In these they have demonstrated their understanding for the principles of the school and have shown their appreciation.

Children have been involved in individual fund-raising efforts for the school using their own initiative. One of the most significant efforts is the group of three 10-year-olds who planned a dance concert. They selected and choreographed most of their own dances, used the computer to prepare their tickets and flyers, and to solicit support for their costumes from business places and they regularly and patiently practised for the programme with the help of teachers whom they selected.

In short, the Teacher Gloria Omololu Institute has demonstrated that for these children ‘Education is not the filling of a vessel but the kindling of a fire’ (Plutarch). But to light those fires we must have the match. That match is our own, our own enthusiasm, our own desire to make a difference. We must be on fire ourselves. We all represent the possibility of universal transformation!