

A Transforming Vision

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“If leadership is truly transformational...its inspirational motivation provides followers with challenges and meanings for engaging in shared goals and undertakings. Its intellectual stimulation helps followers to question assumptions and to generate more creative solutions to problems...” Bass, 1996.

It would be impossible to capture the significance of Lloyd Best’s life for the Caribbean region, and in particular for us here in Trinidad and Tobago, in such a small space. Best was a renowned economist, a creative thinker, and, perhaps inevitably, an intellectual maverick. In a country whose people Naipaul once described as *Mimic Men*, Best resolutely maintained a transforming vision of what we in this country could become. He certainly had his own ideas of what education in Trinidad and Tobago should be.

Few of those ideas have yet been realised, and it is to some extent fashionable to dismiss him as a dreamer. However, Best’s vision for education was based on a clear-headed and practical understanding, not always of schools and education systems, and the technical procedures used in curriculum building, but of the philosophy and understanding of culture that should inform how education must be planned and practised in this country. He understood the importance of making the curriculum more than a lifeless document, and more of a powerful experience. No trained educator himself, Best made proposals for the transformation of education, which were informed by an understanding of how people learn that is fully in keeping with cutting-edge curriculum and learning theory in the twenty-first century.

It is generally accepted that one of the foundations of curriculum decision-making is society and culture. A curriculum should be based on a sound understanding of the values and norms of the societies the curriculum is meant to serve. Sound curriculum practice must be grounded in the authentic lives of communities if the curriculum is to avoid the danger of providing students with fragmented learning experiences. It was once assumed that coherence could be achieved by ensuring that the separate elements were placed logically together. Today it is understood that coherence is based, above all, on students’ ability to make connections between the planned content and learning experiences of the curriculum and the authentic life of the communities and cultures where students are based.

Best’s vision of educational reform, first formally articulated more than eleven years ago, was summarized in the concept of “school in pan” and was based on just such an understanding of the integral relationship between schools and the community. “School in pan” was his metaphor for the envisaged transformation of the relationship among family, community, economy, and school. He saw schooling as supporting student apprenticeships in the valued practices of our culture, like the steelpan. Such apprenticeships would ensure that these practices are preserved and developed in response to the changing needs of our society. Students would learn to solve authentic problems they encountered in enacting such cultural practices. To do so, they would need

to bring together concepts and procedural knowledge encountered in a range of disciplines.

Years afterwards, educators such as Wells (1999) were to publish works that had as their central theme the notion of effective schooling as “semiotic apprenticeship.” Current thinking describes the learning process as one in which experts move novices from “legitimate peripheral participation” in the valued practices of their communities to the centre as master practitioners themselves. All of these ideas were already critical to Best’s vision of educational reform many years before they became part of mainstream educational discourses.

Paolo Friere has advocated exposure to educational experiences through which people become more autonomous as they develop a deeper understanding of the values and conditions that affect their lives. By insisting that we come to understand our unique realities here in the Caribbean, and start our education from a sound knowledge of who we are, Best was formulating a liberation pedagogy of his own.

His writing on educational reform was not in the traditional mode of providing a technical response to better curriculum development. Instead, Best reconceptualised schooling as a process through which students reclaimed responsibility for their own learning, and community elders resumed their positive roles in the development of our nation’s youth. In doing so, he became subject to the same criticisms that have been levelled at all those who seek to reconceptualise practice in any field: he was impractical; his ideas were not translatable into real-world practice. As the literature now shows, however, many of yesterday’s implausible visions are becoming today’s best practice.

Thus, in education, as in so many other areas of the life of our national society, Lloyd Best provided a transforming vision that educators would do well to revisit.

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