Change and Learning Communities
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The vice-principal had been attending a Secondary Education Modernization Programme (SEMP) training course. Now, as she told me about her efforts to carry out her assignment, she was obviously extremely frustrated. She had developed a design for an integrated curriculum that would give students the opportunity to address problems they identified as important to them and their communities. Having been taught about the importance of the principal's role in leading change, she had gone to her principal with her suggestions, happy that, finally, her students might actually begin to look at school time as more than a test of their endurance.

Now she laughed wryly. "And you know what the woman told me?" she asked. "She said she's too old for this kind of thing. She said I'd better wait until I am a principal myself, and know what it is to run a school and have to be changing, changing, changing every minute." She paused, then added angrily. "It's because of people like that, that's why they could spend money like water, and train people forever in this place, and nothing will change."

I know a number of principals who, over the years, have continued to be responsive to proposed changes, once they are sure that their students will benefit. However, even these principals complain from time to time about how wearying it is to be expected to cope with change from all sides; to ensure that staff are equipped to respond to those changes creatively, so that students profit from them; and to determine, finally, which changes make sense, and which don't. Many of them sympathise with the principal who decided she was just too old, and that she would keep things as they were.

I also know many teachers who graduated from our own programmes at the School of Education, and from programmes in other institutions, excited about the possibilities for improvement in the new understandings about good teaching and good schools that they had developed. However, they have gradually become disheartened and have stopped trying to initiate change in their schools.

A big part of the problem for many educators who would like to embrace change is simply the enormous challenge of always having to act alone, and to deal with the uncertainty they feel about the value of their efforts. Teachers tell how they see students start to improve, and how they then gradually see them lose interest when they realise that the new practices that Miss or Sir brought to the classroom will not continue as they go to other classes. Principals relate how they came back from workshops or leadership programmes eager to make a difference, and found that their staff responded cynically, or simply with indifference, clinging to outdated mental models of what constitutes good schools and good teaching.

Peter Senge has long emphasised the importance of organisations developing as learning communities to deal with change in the world of business. Ironically, he and others have only more recently begun to understand the importance of developing *schools* as learning

communities. The benefits are well documented. The research suggests that when professionals come together, the community creates and recreates itself to respond to inevitable changes in the environment. Teacher and administrator learning is often deeper, resulting in ever more sophisticated problem-solving capabilities. In addition, student learning is facilitated in a culture that values and supports ongoing interaction, the articulation and testing of ideas, and continuous processing of new information.

What is a learning community? While there is no universally accepted definition, the literature suggests six important features by which a learning community can be recognized: 1) supportive and shared leadership, 2) shared values and vision, 3) collective learning and application of learning, 4) supportive conditions, 5) a collaborative environment and collegial relationships, and 6) inquiry and reflection-oriented personal practice.

While the idea of "community" suggests common values and practices, the learning community also provides opportunities for celebrating diversity. For instance, learning communities are capable of breaking down traditional boundaries created among subjects and cultures. They provide safer environments within which to conduct the challenging conversations that are necessary for educators in Trinidad and Tobago to deal with our different perspectives on so many issues.

Two important themes emerge from this analysis of the features of the learning community—the need for collaboration, and the need for inquiry and reflection. Our schools must expend greater effort to address these needs. In too many cases, educators repeat old habits, or attempt new practices, in splendid isolation. Visitors to the classroom run the risk of being seen as intruders or spies. After all, where the norm is for one person to take sole responsibility and blame for a decision, it is entirely reasonable that that person should seek to protect himself or herself from scrutiny and possible criticism. And where the success or failure of an innovation is judged by often subjective criteria, then criticism may be devastating, and subversive of further attempts at change.

The School of Education tries to cultivate habits of teacher inquiry and reflection. At every level of our programmes, students are required to do some form of research into classroom or institutional practice. However, I once asked a primary school teacher what she would do with her own, very exciting study when it was completed. She shrugged – it would go nowhere, she told me, but into her own collection of completed assignments, eventually to be thrown out. At school, if the strategy seemed to have succeeded with her class, the principal might ask her to tell other teachers about it. Some people might use it. Clearly, however, there would be no attempt to analyse its possibilities and limitations.

It is in this that our weakness lies, and our possibilities for effective change are limited. We must establish communities where people will feel supported in their efforts to learn and grow, but will also expect that those efforts will be subjected to analysis, and adaptation as necessary, without any derogatory implications for themselves. Until we do this, educators will be reluctant to risk change. And until they are willing to make the effort to try new approaches and to learn from both their successes and their failures, they

will not develop the new skills and knowledge that will equip them to deal with the changing environments in which they practise their professions.

Workshops and training programmes alone, however well conceptualised, will not do it. And so the words of the vice-principal will continue to ring true: we may spend money like water, and train people forever - yet nothing will change.

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