Challenges of Inclusive Schooling
By Michael Kallon

The discussion in this article is grounded in some specific personal experiences of the challenges and the constraints that the search for "inclusivity" poses to the status quo in the Caribbean education system. I recall my early days as a "foreign" graduate student in a Canadian postgraduate institution, and some of the subtle nuances and messages that made me at times feel "inadequate" and wanting to be "included." I vividly remember an advertisement on a noticeboard in the cafeteria, which invited "international students" to enrol in English conversation classes, saying "guaranteed to lose your accents." I remember the agonising time I spent debating whether enrolling in the programme would be beneficial for me in the long run if I wanted to "make it." Interestingly, the fact that my accent would eventually end up being one of the things that readily identifies me as Sierra Leonean-born and an African person did not cross my mind as something positive at the time.

Today, as I enjoy the privilege of teaching in one of the Caribbean's foremost institutions of higher learning, I see the struggle for "inclusivity" being continually waged all around me. Increasingly, many of my graduate students are challenging educators to be more inclusive in their pedagogies and other educational practices. The message I keep hearing from the students is that something is not right with the education system, from its constructed hierarchies to the privileging of certain voices and the practices that lead to students' disengagement from school.

These experiences are significant educational moments that speak in diverse ways to how the structural processes of schooling and education provide unequal opportunities and create different outcomes for students according to race, ethnicity, gender, and class.

It is disheartening to note that many educators are still struggling to achieve a comprehensive understanding of how race and the relational aspects of difference (ethnicity, class, and gender) affect the schooling and educational outcomes of youth. The situation demands that an educator be willing to be a "voice of difference"—an idea that was central to the thrust of the International Symposium on Teacher Education that was recently hosted by the British Council and the School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine from April 28th to the 30th, 2004.

To achieve the task of inclusive schooling and education, educators will have to generate alternative approaches in the classroom and, sometimes, oppositional initiatives to the current education thrust. It is argued that the lack of an inclusive schooling environment makes it difficult for youth to develop a sense of identification with, and connectedness to, their schools.

The question then is, what is inclusive schooling?

Inclusive schooling refers to educational practices that make for genuine inclusion of all students by addressing equity issues and promoting successful learning outcomes.

Inclusive schooling is making excellence accessible to all students. Of equal significance, the idea of inclusive schooling seeks to develop schools into "working communities" and to bring the notions of community and "social responsibility" to the centre of public schooling in the Caribbean contexts. Dealing with our social, economic, cultural, and class differences is the key to inclusive schooling and education. It means developing a broad-based curriculum and diverse teaching strategies, and having support systems in the schools that enhance the conditions for success for all students.

Therefore, the starting point for developing an inclusive curriculum is for educators to acknowledge that racism, ethnicity, classism, and sexism are an integral part of Caribbean society. We must privilege and not eschew diversity and difference in conceptualising what may be characterised as inclusive schooling.

The task of developing an inclusive curriculum begins with educators asking critical questions about themselves, the schools, and society in general. These are questions around the broad themes of race, class, and sexual and gender equity, as well as pedagogical and educational practices of teachers and schools. For example, educators and those who subscribe to the ideas of transformative learning need to ask: Do all students have equal access to available resources and materials in the school setting? What is taught in the schools? What is not taught? What should be taught, by whom, and how? Do the teaching styles used engage and equip students with the critical thinking skills needed to question all aspects of the curriculum? Do educators see the cultures that students bring to school as a source of cultural enrichment or as cultural baggage? These questions are by no means exhaustive nor do I profess to have answers to all of them. However, it is important to note that critical teaching moves beyond a mere recognition of difference to involve responding meaningfully and concretely to differences.

The key to building a truly inclusive school is a transformation of the conventional curriculum. One cannot talk about inclusive schooling, or even a balanced curriculum, without reforming existing teaching, pedagogic, and communicative practices. We need new and alternative teaching and learning practices that help students in diverse ways. Educators should be able to devise and implement alternative instructional strategies that provide students with group and collaborative skills, and the ability to identify and solve basic human problems. The curriculum and classroom instructional practice could be adapted to the local environment.

A possible problem is that educational critics may be asking some teachers to teach in ways and/or perform in settings for which they have not been duly trained. Not every teacher in the current school system has the skills and knowledge to interrogate the status quo and question why things are the way they are. In fact, not surprisingly, some teachers justify inequality and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given.

In sum, the issue of inclusive schooling transcends the call for curriculum and pedagogical reform. It calls for engaging in the task of structural transformation. Fundamentally, it calls for creating spaces for alternative and oppositional knowledge to

flourish and not be marginalised. It calls for new ways of thinking about schooling and education.

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