

Workforce Development in Schools

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Work is important to human well-being; it keeps us healthy and imbues us with a feeling of usefulness. Work shapes our identities and provides us with opportunities for socialising and creating. Work can provide money to pay for leisure and contemplation. It can also be an end in itself, as hobbies and pastimes. When people are unprepared for work, it can result in chaos, alienation, and deviancy.

Our primary and secondary schools need to implement programmes of workforce development to induct students into the culture of work, generally. Vocational training in specific occupations should be done later in industry and post-secondary institutions. Workforce development should address all levels of work, and should include all students, regardless of aspirations, gender, disabilities, or social class.

Changes in the workplace

The modern work environment has become unpredictable, mainly because of globalisation and technological advances. In this country, production of services has expanded and there are indications of growth in the informal sector. Organisations now have fewer hierarchical levels, with increasing degrees of worker empowerment. The workplace is now more sensitive to the environment, democracy, health and safety, quality, and inclusiveness. These changes demand that new workers be enterprising, in possession of high levels of basic education, and with a broad grounding in technology. Students need to know about careers, appropriate work attitudes, and they must be committed to independent and lifelong learning.

Workforce development in primary and secondary schools

There is a myth that individuals are either academically inclined or non-academically inclined, and that these capacities are fixed for life. However, the noted researcher, Benjamin Bloom, found that 95% of any population could succeed at secondary education, if properly taught. Another myth is that low achievers can become high achievers when placed in vocational streams. These beliefs ignore the fact that practical performance relies on intelligent decisions, which are often based on knowledge of mathematics, science, and other academic disciplines. It is suggested here that programmes for workforce development should be introduced in our primary and secondary schools focusing on basic education, technology education, career education, and enterprise education.

Basic education

Basic education normally includes reading, writing, and arithmetic. It now aims at developing interpersonal skills, problem-solving ability, and the capability to communicate in oral and electronic forms. Students learn to access and critically evaluate information. They also learn how to work in teams, how to learn, and independent learning strategies for personal self-development. Today, many students leave school without basic education. This situation can be addressed by early diagnosis, remedial action, and by improving the methods and technology of classroom teaching. A good

basic education allows transitions from one kind of work to another. Without basic education, students will be unable to benefit from future job-training interventions.

Technology education

Technology education prepares students for living in a technological world. They learn to use common technological devices, and develop awareness of the health and environmental consequences of technology. It is a “hands on” programme in which students learn to identify problems in their community, and create technological solutions using basic tools and available resources. Technology education is often organised around the technological fields of transportation, production, communication, and biotechnology. A curriculum in technology education for primary and lower secondary schools has been prepared and piloted by a team of consultants from UWI on behalf of CARICOM.

Career education

Career education (not to be confused with career counselling and career information) helps students make informed decisions about future studies and work, and prepares them for effective entry, participation, and progress in the workplace. It develops students' awareness of the career options available, and how to access these options. Career education provides opportunities to explore the implications and purpose of various occupations, the routine activities, the opportunities for growth, and the ethical, attitudinal, and other demands they make on individuals. Apart from studying how jobs are created, students learn how jobs are lost and how to respond to periods of unemployment. A useful approach to career education is to integrate it with social studies, and to arrange for short periods of structured workplace learning, whereby students have the opportunity to be part of authentic work environments.

Enterprise education

Some people are disposed to be helpless and dependent. They prefer to be led, spoon-fed, and directed. Enterprising individuals, on the other hand, are action-oriented and capable of taking control of their own future. They have the skills and dispositions to be innovative, to take risks, to cope with change, and to identify and successfully exploit opportunities for personal or organisational improvement. Enterprising people do not merely suggest ideas, but can take action to bring their ideas to reality and turn adversity into opportunity. These abilities are important for success in the workplace, whether in paid employment or self-employment. The aims of enterprise education can be achieved by providing opportunities to be innovative in the existing school subjects. Entrepreneurial education is a subset of enterprise education, which deals with how businesses can be established, and it involves activities in identifying opportunities, assessing business potential, and preparing business plans. Students participate in genuine activities, such as Junior Achievement projects, to develop these abilities.

Conclusion

In closing two points must be made. Firstly, the introduction of workforce development in the primary and secondary schools requires drastic reform of teaching and learning practices. There should be a focus on quality, and teaching methods must involve less

passive learning and more active engagement with meaningful tasks, where students interact with the wider society in order to find meaning and derive understanding.

Secondly it must be acknowledged that despite exemplary programmes of workforce development, there can still be high levels of unemployment unless the state makes appropriate responses to economic forces. If there is low demand in the economy, our well-educated youth will remain unemployed. However, if steps are taken to add value to our primary products, develop new products, expand markets, and increase output, employment opportunities will be created and participants of workforce development programmes will be well poised to embark on successful careers.

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