

Holistic Education

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“Strengthening a Tradition of Holistic Education” was the theme chosen for the recent biennial teachers’ convention organised by the Presbyterian Secondary Schools’ Board of Education. It was certainly an interesting package from all perspectives. Areas examined were the role of middle management, discipline, and values education. At the outset, though, if one were to examine the notion of holistic education as it was intended by the Presbyterian missionaries, one would note that perspectives have shifted since the passion to “convert” through education. Though we may indeed be tempted to maintain the concept of conversion, religion should not be the umbrella under which we seek to operate.

In addressing the issue of values education, the first premise we may need to move away from is the idea that values must be linked to religion. Is it that those who are not religious or do not adhere to religious doctrine are without values? When we engage in discussion with educators who have the responsibility to enhance the young human capital—to educate “holistically,” we first need to rid ourselves of baggage that we have carried for such a long period of time that it has become the very skin we wear. A teacher in a multi-religious setting needs tools to harness the goodness inherent in all human beings without creating or introducing distinctions and biases that only further exacerbate tensions and conflicts in our society and in our classrooms.

As such, it is incumbent upon the teacher in any educational setting to begin to engage in serious reflection and to be open to “moving out of the box.” Reports from the Presbyterian teachers’ convention indicate that Dr. Balchan Rampaul, who delivered the presentation on “the Role of Middle Management,” was able to open teachers’ eyes to the possibilities of new paradigms for the framing of visions and missions to guide their execution of duties as Heads of Departments and Deans. Oftentimes, teachers walk away from workshops, courses, and conferences refreshed, invigorated, and inspired to change their modus operandi or, at least, to initiate change. However, too often it is the “how” of change that is the most difficult to envisage.

If one looks at modern business techniques, including the now so popular area of project management, it would be evident that the basic principles of task analysis apply. Any training in lesson planning would incorporate the application of task analysis, a key to the question of “where am I going and how will I get there?” So that school administrators and teachers must, in the first instance, continuously self-diagnose. The well-known SWOT analysis is a tried-and-tested strategy that educators may find useful. It enables the user to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of whatever one is analysing, whether it be department, school, or any aspect of the organisation. The finding after such an exercise may well be that the provision of holistic education calls for common understandings among administrative and teaching staff, and that what is needed is an overhauling of school rules and approaches to discipline. Other findings may be that teachers of the particular school do not have an appreciation of the importance of an undergirding philosophy to guides their approaches to teaching and relating to students

and parents. The point here is that self-analysis is an enabling and thus empowering strategy that is available to any institution.

This brings us to the point of school-based management, which appears to be the current thrust in the educational arena. Such management calls for foresight, logic, and strong organisational skills on the part of school administrators. It also presumes functional interpersonal skills and, I would dare add, some degree of charisma, the latter being based on both power and authority that come from apparent expertise. The individual school operating as an entity would need to have the capacity to organise personnel by delegating, fostering teamwork, and by creating time for such non-teaching activity as would eventually impact on actual teaching.

Planning for holistic education calls for a review of the term *holistic*. There is a feeling among some that the term signifies the provision of extra- and co-curricular activities. But one ought to bear in mind that it is what these activities accomplish that is important. It is not just the provision of a skill in a game or the development of a talent. More importantly, it is how such involvement contributes to the overall growth of a student. And it is how we want students to develop that is significant to our planning and provision. Thus, the way we relate to students becomes more important than the subject content of the lesson. The values we as teachers portray in and out of the classroom become the most important lessons that we teach.

The provision of holistic education calls for a deliberate effort on the part of school administrators to harness the self-diagnostic strengths that all teachers possess. Teachers are a rich bank of resources waiting to be tapped. Administrators must develop the skills to be able to do this. The staff of a school first has to develop itself holistically before it attempts to provide such development for its students. There are schools where principals are alienated from teachers. But then there is the staff which bonds together, encourages and supports each other, and is also able to express constructive criticism which, in the end, works towards the benefit of the school as a whole.

The provision of holistic education is a goal to be pursued by all educational institutions. I would therefore encourage principals to find ways of encouraging teachers to devise small-scale interventions in and out of classrooms by utilising the principles of action research. Successes generated from such interventions should be highlighted, discussed, and implemented on a wider scale. I would suggest that a reward scheme be adopted for such research whereby teachers feel encouraged and empowered. Let "Professional Day" be the forum for "teacher as researcher."

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