

Revisiting the SEMP Curriculum

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A recent communication from the Curriculum Division of the Ministry of Education informed me that the division is conducting a programme to prepare teachers to participate in the ongoing process of curriculum reform for the Secondary Education Modernisation Programme (SEMP). I was asked to share my expectations for the SEMP curriculum with the participating teachers. The letter caused me to reflect further on what I would like to see happen in the new phase of SEMP curriculum reform, and what I would expect.

I would expect, certainly, that whatever I said to the teachers would be just one part of a much more extensive dialogue with representatives from all sectors of the society, each of which has a tremendous investment in SEMP. I would expect, therefore, that systems would be put in place to establish and maintain that dialogue. I would hope, too, that the dialogue would include all the representatives of the school system, so that no group would find it necessary to say later that no attempt had been made to consider the needs of their students or teachers.

Furthermore, as I listen to representatives of the business sector talk about their concerns about the rising crime rate, I think: What might the business sector want to see in a process of curriculum reform? Might they not want, for instance, to see greater integration of knowledge, attitudes, and skills relevant to the workplace with those relevant to the more purely academic disciplines? Might they be interested in a curriculum that provides opportunities for students to have more practical work experiences, and would they be willing to develop the types of relationships with schools, with other sectors of the community and with the Ministry of Education that would make such collaborations possible?

A significant contributor to the problems we are facing in the schools, and in the wider society, is certainly the experience of young people that when they leave schools they are not finding jobs, and that they still don't know how to create employment for themselves. A curriculum—across all schools, and not located only in schools euphemistically described as being for “the less academically inclined”—that would help young people develop the relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes, and that would tap the creativity with which they are so abundantly endowed, would be one way of providing young people with the hope and expectation that they will not need to turn to crime to make a living. At the same time, some of the problems of indiscipline and violence in schools might be alleviated, when those schools become places that students see as being more relevant to their practical needs.

I would expect that some thought would go into the limitations on what the curriculum can be expected to do, given the constraints of time and space in a school day, and our finite resources. Not every problem of the society will be solved by adding more to the curriculum content. Dialogue across different groups in the society must determine what needs to be added to the curriculum content, and what might more effectively be handled

by other institutions. Undoubtedly, a quality curriculum can contribute in some measure to solving our social problems, but lines must be drawn between what the curriculum can reasonably be expected to handle, and what it cannot.

I would expect that whatever decisions might be made about content to be added-on to the existing curriculum would be accompanied by hard thought and discussion about what has become irrelevant or outmoded. Some content must be jettisoned, but whenever decisions are made to jettison parts of a curriculum, there is invariably a loud outcry from people who insist that, yes, we must include new content, but that the existing content must also remain sacrosanct.

We must recognise that the days are long gone for some areas of knowledge that used to be held in high esteem. We must ask, too: Do we need to include as much emphasis on knowledge of specified facts as our curriculum still reflects? Or is it time to play down the demand for specified information, and focus more heavily on skills and principles that will help students to acquire and evaluate information that they can get simply by going to the Internet?

However, we also need to ask: Are there some types of knowledge that we must retain? For instance, are we willing to let vital areas of indigenous knowledge disappear? Or do they still have something to contribute, in terms of their place in our cultural heritage and their ongoing contribution to our development?

I would expect that while we are rethinking the necessary content of the curriculum, we would also be thinking of creative ways of redesigning it so as to ensure flexibility, given the speed with which new fields of knowledge and new areas of practice grow and become interrelated in the information society. We would need to remember that the standards that we develop to guide curriculum development should also be so framed as to permit such flexibility. If this is not done, they may create too much constraint on the choices teachers make in schools and classrooms to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of their students.

I would hope that our reforms would include a rethinking of the relationship between the curriculum we develop and our examinations system. The curriculum at the higher levels of the school system remains in bondage to Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) and the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC). The process of developing an actual curriculum may help to wean teachers and students from an unthinking adherence to exam syllabuses, but we must first be able to separate our own agenda from those of the examination syndicates, and to determine where we have objectives in common, and where we may differ or have different emphases. It is likely that one of the greatest challenges facing teachers developing curriculum for this level of the school will be to stop thinking that the curriculum exists primarily to prepare students for examinations.

I would hope that if all these things were done, we might, finally, create a curriculum experience that would be satisfying for our children, and help to make our schools less of the battleground they have become.