

Implementing Inclusive Education: A Call for a Postmodern Perspective in Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract

Globally, the changing demands of society require that learners be trained with innovation and creativity in mind. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030, specifically SDG4, aim to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all students. The technical model of education has been known to stifle learning opportunities for students and promote inequality. In keeping with the world wide mandate for inclusive education that values that right of all students to meaningful education, what is taught and valued as outcomes for all students is an important consideration of the education system. Curricula should be seen as having a positive effect as levers for the sustainable, inclusive, fair and cohesive development of a country. This position paper focuses on current practice in Trinidad and Tobago's school system and describes how it is lacking with regard to the flexibility of the curriculum that is needed for inclusive education implementation. The paper gives a brief overview of the technical and post-modern perspectives of curriculum and aims to justify how a shift to the post-modern perspective might be better suited for our present time. Implications for practice relating to teacher practice, curriculum content and student outcomes, which will all result from increasing the relevance and applicability of our curriculum, are also presented.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Trinidad and Tobago, curriculum, technical, post-modern, perspectives, inclusion.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a certain degree of anger that fills the hearts of Trinbagonians when the history of Trinidad & Tobago (T&T) is spoken of. Slavery and Indentureship attempted to strip T&T's people of dignity, separating families, coercing them to change religions, forcing them to neglect their native languages, forget their villages and cities by geographically cutting them off from their ancient histories and oral traditions, and making them powerless and dependent [1]. The system of education within which learners operate presently in Trinidad and Tobago has been developed based on the model passed on from their colonizers whose legacy left a society that placed commoditized value on everything [2]. In this system, if you do not meet the predetermined, rigid standards of education, you are deemed to be not good enough. A deficit framework exists upon which T&T's education system and curriculum is set up. Knowledge incorporated within the school curriculum often privileges the experiences, beliefs and histories of people who have historically been in power and the entire system is outcomes based, favouring those who conform to the norm [3]. While there have been many notable changes in the teaching

and learning process over the years, the dominance of this type of system continues to be promoted by education officials others in society in spite of worldwide best practices which suggest that this may not be best.

One significant movement, which emerged worldwide since the 1970s and increased momentum in the 1990s in the Caribbean, is the mixture of general education with special education; known as inclusion. Inclusive education is the process of responding to the diversity of children through enhancing participation in classrooms and reducing exclusion from education [4]. Notably, this practice does not only accommodate students with apparent and hidden disabilities, but those with various learning styles and interests as well. Researchers have observed that over the past 20 years, Caribbean education has been through several reforms and changes, most of which have sought to address perceived deficits or problems in the system [5]. Schools have sought to integrate all children and arrange education according to students' needs but have had, and continue to have, many challenges along the way in realizing the true meaning of the approach. This is evidenced by the fact that parallel systems of general

and special education continue to exist, along with the fact that what is taught, the curriculum, continues to be rolled out as value-neutral for all students even though at the heart of inclusive education is the need for individualized educational planning. Ronal Ferguson of Harvard University in a 2016 statement that addressed the achievement gap in societies, highlighted that educational inequality can be deemed as the broader root of societal inequality. This is demonstrated by access to particular careers, degree of income and wealth, and the nature of political participation, however, this ill can be mitigated by the skills that the curriculum offers.

In Trinidad and Tobago, as in other parts of the Caribbean region, the society's perspective of the curriculum must change so that equality can be a value outcome of the desired inclusive education system. According to Thomas [6], "curriculum theory work over recent decades has focused on identifying various perspectives from which curriculum is viewed and the implications of those perspectives for the kind of curriculum that is developed and its implications for learners, educators, institutions and agencies that sponsor educational programs and society". Two viewpoints are of particular interest. These are the modern (technical) perspective because it closely aligns with the system of education that Trinidad and Tobago has inherited, and the post-modern perspective because it represents a view for continued development of our nation. Aligned to ongoing improvement, the Education Act states that the promotion of the education of the people of Trinidad and Tobago and the establishment of a system of education designed to provide adequately for the planning and development of an educational service related to the changing needs of the community, are desired outcomes [7]. This paper presents a brief overview of both perspectives noted above and then gives a justification for a shift to the postmodern perspective in the post-colonial context of Trinidad and Tobago.

Technical Perspective of Curriculum

Also known as the scientific or modern approach, the technical view is the traditional way of developing curricula that focuses on subject matter or subject matter standards [8]. The technical perspective of curriculum takes the position that educational curricula's primary goal is to transmit the accumulated knowledge of society [9]. The focus is on content recall and efficiency. It is consistent with the essentialist philosophy of education (a merging of idealism and realism), which purports that we must know the basics of life - survival, how to be productive, and how to live as proper civilians. This is the view that was adopted as societies emerged and there was a need to prepare a structured workforce.

Proponents of this perspective suggest that the main purpose of education is to acculturate children

[10]. This allows them to fit well into society and be functional. Additionally, others believe that the structure which this view of curriculum embodies, has helped with regulating appropriate behaviour in the classroom and, by extension, the society at large. Given that students must be disciplined in order to successfully complete their training, this teaches them how to conform to school and societal rules. Further, since there are clear starting and ending points in this approach to curriculum, student success is systematic and measurable.

Opponents of the technical perspective argue that it is too rigid given the diverse mix of students that are present in every classroom. The fact that there are unalterable boundaries excludes categories such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity, consequently reproducing "relations of domination, subordination, and inequality" [11]. Furthermore, another criticism comes from those who put forward that this view does not account for "...theories of learning, of motivation, of knowledge, or of school and society" [12].

Postmodern perspective of curriculum

Contrary to the technical approach, the post-modern perspective of curriculum emphasizes content with the individual learner, curricular relevance, and context in mind [13]. Post-modernism has an eclectic nature which does not bound students to specific subjects [14]. This perspective is related to humanistic, perennialist, progressive, and reconstructionist philosophies of education. Some researchers describe postmodernism as transformational [15]. The curriculum is non-linear and child-centered and recognizes that students are not interchangeable and do not all learn at the same pace. Others assert that while post-modernism considers the past, it simultaneously transcends the past [16]. Entwined, the new is built on the old and the future is a transformation of the past.

The advantages of this view of curriculum are that it situates education within the context of culture and allows for reflection and collaboration. Flexible curriculum and pedagogy also allows for the cause of inclusion, and the general quality of education, to be improved [17]. Proponents suggest the major strength of post-modernism is the creation of new knowledge and the transformation of learning. It is argued that the educational theories of Dewey, Piaget and Bruner, who advocate child centered learning and development, are better understood and blossom more fully and richly in a post-modern milieu [15].

Although there are few criticisms of the postmodern perspective, some argue it recognizes diversity: women, gays, and people of color, but fails to engage people in activities that lead to self/social empowerment [18]. This is an area that should be given consideration in practice so that it can be realized through intention and attention. Additionally, there is

also the view that implementing this approach will cause schools to be in chaos due to the teaching of a minimum and flexible curriculum and barely maintaining control of students [19].

The Trinidad and Tobago Context

Those who have been through the experience of schooling to date in Trinidad and Tobago might recall that the pursuit of education has always been a means to achieve an end (prescribed certification for a job; to fit in to the mould of success). The study of Mathematics, Language Arts and at least one Science subject are mandatory. The use of 'Standard English' is also a requirement and Trinbagonian creole or dialect is usually frowned upon. At all school levels, clear objectives about what should be taught and learned have always been given and there is always the need for reproduction of what is given by the teacher who is viewed to be the repository of knowledge. Even those who are educators give testimony to the bureaucracy involved in their attempts to cater to students with special needs using concepts of differentiation and universal design. These have proven that there is limited place in the country's education system for deviating from the norm. Inability to perform well on standardized paper and pencil tests result in students being viewed as failures. These all indicate that the education system was designed with the technical perspective of curriculum in mind.

The "Curriculum in the Education 2030 Agenda: Latin America and the Caribbean" document discusses the importance of rethinking the curriculum in light of a transformational, humanistic and holistic vision of education. The Education 2030 Agenda, which emerged from the World Education Forum (WEF) 2015 held in Incheon, Republic of Korea, positions curriculum as a powerful education policy tool leading the way to effective, relevant and sustainable learning opportunities, processes and outcomes. Curricula have a positive effect as levers for the sustainable, inclusive, fair and cohesive development of a country. It is true that education systems the world over are powerful forces in the lives of children. These forces help students to shape perceptions about themselves and others, outline ambitions for themselves, and determine beliefs about success or failure. According to Bristol [20], the need exists to adopt an approach that is indigenizing, one that is relational, and one that focuses attention on the question of the revision of educational power, by bringing our students to the center of knowledge production and knowledge making. There is need to unblock the channels of creativity, connecting history to literature, geography, cultural and aesthetic analysis and the other disciplines. In order for Trinidad and Tobago's education system to remain relevant and current, technocrats should be open to changing perspectives to such as that purported by Scott [21] for

nations to "acknowledge the many reasons why twenty-first century learning must be different".

Justification for Shift from Technical to Post-Modern

There is little doubt that the technical approach to curriculum served its purpose in the past context of Trinidad and Tobago. Indeed, in colonial times it was necessary to train a select few to assume positions in society and basic schooling allowed for subservience of the rest. However, given that its people now operate in the post-colonial era where they have embraced freedom as a right, where national development is not static, and where there is widespread recognition of the diversity of people, change to a postmodern perspective of curriculum is necessary, if not utopian. As aptly described by Lasch [22], "Schooling is not a cure-all for everything that ails us". There are also several authors who argue that T&T must move beyond reproduction models of culture and develop the sort of theory that stresses the work of the school in the 'production of meanings', though this does not mean that they thereby abandon a recognition of the social and political location and function of schooling [23].

There are a number of policies that T&T has envisioned as necessary to its development that supports the shift to postmodernist perspective. One example is the Education for All (EFA) goals adopted by Trinidad and Tobago at the World Education Forum in the year 2000. This is representative of the nation's desire for the development of universal, quality and equitable education systems for all children, youths and adults. The Trinidad and Tobago National Commission for UNESCO was established in July 1970 by Cabinet Minute No. 1646 under the Ministry of Education and is mandated to ensure that goals such as the provision of education (especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children) and improving all aspects of the quality of education are met [4]. If these goals are to be realized, facets of the technical perspective like centralization, mass production and mass consumption must be removed. Taking its place should be flexibility, allowing for critical thinking, creativity, appreciation of culture and identity, and the appreciation for a plurality of methodologies and strategies of inquiry. These would allow for T&T's citizens to proudly be themselves (appreciating history and cultural backgrounds) and engage in learning experiences that lead to self-actualization.

According to Ornstein and Hunkins [24], the nontechnical-nonscientific (postmodern) approach reflects the world as a living organism, whereas the technical-scientific approach reflects a vision of the world as a machine. Paulo Freire also coined the term "banking model" for the technical perspective, illustrating that students are turned into "containers" or "receptacles" to be filled by the teacher as education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students

are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. These metaphors show that the technical approach that we have been using is dehumanizing. Isn't this a significant enough justification for a shift in perspective? Trinbagonians are not one standard off the shelf people! Rather, rich diversity is an inherent part of who they are and if the country is to thrive on this, the education system must employ best practices. The slavish obligation to complete curriculum objectives does not define good teaching. Research indicates that best practice in education allows teachers to acknowledge and build upon the diversity in the classroom. The past sole focus on implementing prescribed objectives and performance criteria has turned teaching into a mechanical process of training students to pass tests, while unnecessarily restricting teachers' freedom to open their students' minds [25].

Yet another justification for the shift to postmodernism is the fact that we live in a now global society. The effects of globalization on education brought rapid developments in technology and communications (ICT) and changes within learning systems across the world. Increases in ideas, values and knowledge, changed roles of students and teachers, and the production of a shift in society from industrialization towards an information-based society have all come about [26]. There is now the rise of a new culture for shaping children - the future citizens of the world- into 'global citizens'; intelligent people with a broad range of skills and knowledge to apply to a competitive, information based society [27]. A society characterized by advanced technology and complex social dynamics which did not exist at the time modernity was emerging (colonial Trinidad and Tobago) is the new face of the country. Adopting post-modernism will result from new ways of thinking and different perspectives indicative of a world that is changing before our eyes [28]. Leadbeater [29] argues that the successful reinvention of educational systems worldwide depends on transforming pedagogy and redesigning learning tasks. Promoting learner autonomy and creativity is part of the solution.

CONCLUSION

The implications for practice are significant [21]. First, it will require educators to redefine their perceptions and seek out best practices and new methodologies so as not to feel daunted by the pressures and expectations to provide quality curriculum and instruction for students who have a multitude of learning needs and interests. Secondly, educational institutions will need to experiment with alternative structural formats and strategies for learning and teaching that respond more flexibly to individual learners' needs and changing labour market requirements. Thirdly, accountability for teaching and learning will be a high priority and radical changes in teacher training for inclusive education practice will be essential. If these are done, many benefits will follow.

Tobin [30] confirms that the development of community would result; every student would feel validated about their intellectual competence; and educators would feel more accomplished. Redecker *et al.*, [31] also assert that personalization will result and this allows for the quick capture of information about learners' aptitudes and progress. Saavedra and Opfer [32] also note that the creativity that is needed to meet the present day demands of society will be encouraged, identified and fostered.

It is time to question the technical assumptions and develop a new perspective that simultaneously rejects, transforms and preserves that which has been [33]. We live in a global society now where there are no fixity, stability and absolutes. Major changes have taken place in recent times. Since change is exponential, it is not feasible to say with assurance what our twenty-first century students will need from our schools. In keeping with best practices of research around the world, curriculum is to be negotiated by teachers and students in an attempt to increase the relevance and applicability of learning [34]. It is my firm belief that the bridge between the technical perspective and the postmodern perspective of curriculum could be built for postcolonial Trinidad and Tobago by adopting practices that give power to the learners, prompt inquiry and creativity. It all begins with a desire for change.

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