



CIPRIANI COLLEGE OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

It is about time for inclusive education in Trinidad and Tobago

No longer can inclusive education be treated as an appendix to the general curriculum in primary and secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) with scarce resources being allocated toward a seemingly difficult topic, which some stakeholders are often hesitant to speak about. Inclusive education is defined as providing equal and equitable educational opportunities to diverse students regardless of their marginalized dimensions such as their age, geographical location, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, mental abilities together with their ethnicity and even nationality. These marginalized dimensions amongst others often make our students at risk or near at risk which challenge their accessibility to educational opportunities as regular students. It cannot be that the constitution of this twin island state which advocates education as a fundamental right and the country's obedience to the United Nations (1948) Declaration of Human rights and the Salamanca Framework (1994) remain as verbiage and rhetoric for several decades. Collectively as a society we must do more. School, educators, principals, the Ministry, students, parents, the community and the public and private sectors must collaboratively work together to find innovative solutions to tackle the different problems associated with inclusive education. If not, the vast talent in our diversified student population would be a hidden gem, yearning for discovery.

With inclusive education having the potential to increase marginalized students' accessibility to education, narrowing the student achievement gap and improving their preparation for the diverse working environment, creative solutions must uproot the funding,

cultural and systematic inclusive education challenges facing every school level, from early childhood, through primary to higher education. Given the constraints of the harsh economic environment, efficient and effective solutions must be sought. Whilst stating that the Ministry of Education must allocate inclusive funding for books, technology and teachers' professional development may represent good verbiage, practical and low cost solutions are needed now by all. After all, the problem of lack of accessibility and opportunities for marginalized students go far beyond the funding and resources dilemma which permeates every sector. Tough times require out of the box thinking. To this end, school principals must advocate inclusive leadership and shape school cultures and values to stimulate teachers to explore creative instructional and curriculum assessment practices to be truly representative for the diverse abilities in the classroom. With school principals and the Ministry creating the enabling environment, teachers must be encouraged to use creative cultural exercises, inclusive rooms amongst other strategies to identify and support disadvantaged students. A 'hands on' collaborative approach is required to adjust the curriculum to reflect students' diversity needs and counter the 'curriculum rush' to complete the content at a specific date thereby providing teachers with needed time to truly reflect on and model inclusive practices.

Furthermore, the collegiality must be extended to include parents, the community and society stakeholders to adequately identify and cater for at risk students and those who are likely to become at risk for educational opportunities. Every stakeholder must realise their role to play in the shared governance process of improving inclusive education delivery to our students. Boldly, educational stakeholders must do more to illustrate to corporate businesses the benefits of diversified graduates. Probably, the support and resources will be more forthcoming in an economy where education budget allocations are shrinking and the call for entrepreneurial school

thinking and building stakeholder alliances toward common goals is increasing. Or probably an ombudsman advocate for diversity should be appointed for every parliamentary district in T&T to sense the community problems, report and co-ordinate the inclusive efforts, where failing to identify a challenged student is one too many.

Notwithstanding the potential of stakeholder collaboration in addressing inclusive education problems, an ambidextrous approach of reflection and exploration approach is needed. National reflection on T&T's (2009) inclusive education policy, the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2018) and the Equal Opportunity Act (2000) is needed to determine the effectiveness of these guiding instruments toward inclusive outcomes. Whilst these instruments are commendable when compared to other jurisdictions, there may be suspected gaps in scope, resourcing, cultural disposition and implementation. As such, an immediate measurable action plan should be drafted with short to long term goals for improvement with clear data indicators for monitoring and achievement. Conversely, an explorative approach of identifying how our nearby South American friends with a different mother tongue can fit into our indigenous curriculum or how can greater technology accessibility be provided to rural students in the blended teaching mode. These are some of the real inclusive challenges which confront our educational system and unless we accept shared responsibility for its success, this article would only be seen as a 'good read'. After all, inclusive education calls for an inclusive effort by all. The time is now.

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